

The Vinedresser Who Prunes (John 15.1-2)

I. REVIEW: LET NOT YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED

- A. On the night prior to his crucifixion, Jesus gave a dynamic and profound teaching to his disciples outlining truths that are intended to guard and stabilize their hearts in the midst of the coming crisis.
- B. Jesus exhorted his followers to not let their hearts be troubled (John 14.1) and promised them that he would give them peace as they walked through trials and testing (John 14.27).

¹Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me... ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. (John 14.1, 27)

- C. The *means* that Jesus gave to them for engaging their trouble hearts in the midst of crisis and hardship was to *believe in God* and *believe in him*.
- D. Jesus relates the truths of John 14-16 to standing firm, without offense. A troubled heart is often the seedbed for offense; and offense is the seedbed for deception and stumbling.

¹I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away (*stumbling, NASB*). (John 16.1)

- E. Jesus did not leave us to ourselves in the face of such dynamics of the heart. He gives us storehouses of truth that we are to seek to lay hold of in the midst of our troubles. He promises to release peace as we engage the truths he has revealed to us.

II. UNION WITH CHRIST AND FRUITFULNESS

- A. John 15 is one of the highpoints of Scripture in speaking of our relationship with God. Jesus demonstrates that he is the true vine and his people are his branches. The call of this passage is to “abide” in Christ in order to experience the power of fruitfulness that comes from union with him.
- B. Bearing fruit speaks of both *internal realities* (love for God, character, etc.) and *external ministry and service*. Fruitfulness in the Biblical sense is not about size or scope but is about the cultivation of the fruits of the Spirit in our lives (internal) and inspiring it in others (external).
- C. Another way you could speak of fruitfulness is to speak of what is truly great and successful in the life of the believer. We all long for true and lasting greatness, and we desire for our endeavors to be deemed successful. However, the way that we evaluate greatness and success is often misguided and shaped by prevailing ideas found within the world or our culture.
- D. Jesus defined greatness as loving him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Eternal significance (fruitfulness) has little to do with our external or outward success — but is rather the *quality* of our internal life and our desire to impart that quality into the lives of others.

³⁷And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

³⁸This is the great and first commandment. (Matt 22.37-38)

- E. In John 15, Jesus does not command believers to be fruitful. Rather, he commands his disciples to *abide* in him, and that he would bring forth fruit by the power of his life within them.

⁴Abide 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... ⁵Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing... ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you... (John 15.4-7)

- F. Abiding in Christ has to do with remaining in consistent relationship with him through actively pursuing trusting obedience to his word.

¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (John 15.10)

- G. Jesus begins John 15 by declaring the seventh of his "I am" statements in the Gospel of John. These statements are intended to demonstrate Jesus' self-understanding as the God-man who brought life and the power of God in and through his person. In this statement Jesus declares that he is the true source for his people.
- H. Much like earlier in John 14 (I am the way, the truth, and the life), Jesus orients himself as the exclusive and particular source of life with God. There is no other way to experience salvation, God's life, or fruitfulness in this world outside of union with Christ.

III. THE VINEDRESSER WHO PRUNES

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every 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. ³Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you. (John 15.1-3)

- A. This passage tells us that the Father is a vinedresser. He is pictured here as a zealous worker who oversees the health and the fruitfulness of his vineyard. This passage teaches us that God himself is more committed to our fruitfulness than we could ever be. This truth stabilizes and keeps our hearts in the midst of seasons of significant difficulty, helping us to reorient our pursuits, our commitments, and our ways of evaluating and seeing what matters.
- B. Throughout Scripture, God had used this image to speak of his relationship to his people. The prophets spoke of God as one who had planted a vineyard and lovingly taken care of it to promote its growth (cf. Isa 5).
- C. To picture God as zealously and actively working for the sake of fruitfulness and life in the midst of his people helps reshape how we understand and respond to seasons of difficulty (both in pruning and in discipline). Later in this passage Jesus demonstrates that the magnitude of God's love is oriented toward his followers. This must be the place we begin when seeking to rightly understand seasons of pruning and discipline.

⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you (John 15.9)

- D. This scripture invites us to see that one of the tools in the Father's hand is the act of pruning back fruitful vines in order that they might produce more fruit. A vinedresser is committed to the greatest possible fruitfulness in the life of the vine. He will use painful and seemingly severe methods to promote greater fruit each year.
- E. There is a close relationship throughout the Scripture between the act of pruning and the act of discipline. They are both activities that the Lord does in order to *remove things that stand in the way of wholehearted love*.
- F. God's great vision for your life is that you would be zealous in love for him. He is working to actively produce greater obedience to him by the Spirit in your life.
- G. We must believe that God is actively working in order to bring forth greater dependence upon him and seeking to produce greater love in us. However, many times we fight against his discipline and his pruning, misunderstanding what he is seeking to accomplish.
- H. There are seasons where the discipline of God is intended to remove *distractions* that get in the way of our lives. These often come from seasons of previous fruitfulness (increase in success, money, position, power, etc.). There are also seasons where the discipline of God is intended to remove *sin* from the lives of a believer who is walking in compromise. We must see each aspect of the pruning knife as a precious gift to us.

I. Removing Distractions

1. A season of blessing and success can create distraction over time. When we experience success or blessing, our activity increases, often leading to a diminishing in our abiding of Christ.
2. Fruitfulness can lead to times where there are more demands on our lives, more responsibilities, and greater expectations of us.
3. At times, the Lord will come into our lives and prune back good things in order to refocus our time and our energy.

³But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor 11.3)

³⁸Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she when up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴²but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken from her." (Luke 10.38-42)

4. In a practical way, a season of pruning may look like removing increased activities, demands, expectations, responsibilities, etc. that come from a season of increased fruitfulness in our lives. Although it is often experienced as a loss, we can see the hand of God in pruning back such activities to make more room for that which is essential.

²I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. (Rev 2.2-5)

J. Removing Sin

1. Another application of the pruning knife of God is intended to remove areas of sin from our lives.
2. Believers can often confuse outward success and fruitfulness for the validation of God upon their lives. Because of this, there are times when God will cut back areas of fruitfulness to expose sin and weakness.
3. God disciplines his children as a loving Father in order that his holiness might be produced in us.

⁵And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶For the Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." ⁷It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For 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. (Heb 12.5-11)

4. A “test” in the Bible is intended to demonstrate the *quality* of our inner life before God and the foundations we have built. Like fire tests the quality of metal (and purifies its imperfections), seasons of fiery testing demonstrate the quality of our internal life and create opportunities for growth as we depend on the Lord.

²⁴Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matt 7.24-27)

IV. UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO SEASONS OF DIFFICULTY

- A. Many believers do not know how to respond to seasons of difficulty because they misunderstand the nature of the season. In order to rightly respond, we must understand the various nature of a season of pressure.
- B. ***The Zeal of God:*** The first category of difficulty (pressure, decrease, etc.) in our lives is seen in this passage. The zeal of our Father for his glory and our good leads him to *prune* away excesses in our lives and actively *discipline* us that we might be transformed. We must accept with grateful hearts that he is zealously committed to producing righteousness in us and will use whatever means he deems necessary.
 1. We respond to his zealous work by *submitting* to his leadership.
 2. In seasons of pruning, discipline, and testing, we ask to see his heart for us.
 3. In areas of *removal of distractions*, we submit by returning to our first love and reorienting our lives to pursue communion with him in simplicity.
 4. In areas of discipline designed to *remove sin*, we submit to him by repenting of our sin, turning to him to receive mercy, and actively seeking to walk in obedience.
- C. ***Spiritual warfare:*** A second category of difficulty is warfare that happens at the hands of Satan and his demons. He is a lion who prowls around seeking to steal, kill, and destroy. Warfare is not to be *submitted* to, but *resisted* through Jesus’ name.

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (Jas 4.7)

³For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor 10.3-5)

- D. ***Results of sin:*** There are times when we experience difficulty as the natural outworking of sin (our own sins and the sins of others). Repenting of sin removes the *guilt* and *condemnation* before God but does not necessarily remove the consequences of that sin (the same can be said with forgiveness). The response to sin is to *repent* and turn to the Lord, asking him for his provision, healing, and grace.
- E. ***Brokenness of creation:*** Because of sin the world has been subjected to a curse (Rom 8.22). This means that creation itself bears the consequences and effects of sin and suffers under the weight of not being the way it should be.
- F. In each type of season, we can respond by asking the Lord to direct our hearts into his love and into the steadfastness (patient endurance) of Christ Jesus.

⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thes 3.5)