

The Pruning Work of God

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[0 : 0 0] All right, well, we're continuing on this morning with the teaching of Jesus in John chapter 15.

This morning's message is a part two flowing out of what we talked about last Sunday. If you missed last Sunday, you can listen to the sermon audio online on our website under sermons.

So I'm just gonna read John chapter 15, verse one to six again, and then just quickly recap the main things that we talked about last Sunday.

And then we'll move on to explore this passage a little deeper. So this is Jesus talking in John chapter 15. I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

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.

[1 : 1 0] You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 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.

I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers.

Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. So we talked about how God is the gardener last Sunday.

[2 : 1 1] God is at work, like a gardener is at work, to bring about a fruitful vineyard, a people full of good fruit. And we talked a little about what good fruit means last Sunday.

It means things like righteousness, justice, love, compassion, honesty, peace, and so on.

And these things stand in contrast to the bad fruit, injustice, oppression, deceitfulness, bloodshed, greed, and so on.

And we talked about how Jesus is the true vine. We looked at a couple places where God spoke about the people of Israel in the past, in the Old Testament, with the metaphor of vineyard, and vines, and fruit.

And we saw how Jesus stands out. Up until now, the vineyard God has planted has, on the whole, brought forth bad fruit.

[3 : 2 4] fruit. And it had to do with the people themselves who were sinners just like us. But now, God has planted the true vine, Jesus, into his vineyard.

And he is the true source of life and of all that is good. God has planted the true vineyard. And we talked a little about how we are the branches, those of us who believe in Jesus.

We talked about how branches are secondary shoots coming off the primary shoot. And I encourage us to think about whether we have that straight in our hearts and minds.

And finally, we talked about our utter need to remain in Jesus, to abide in him, which means to stay closely connected to him, walking in close relationship with him.

So now we want to continue meditating on these words of Jesus. Let's come back to what we talked about last Sunday, that God is the gardener at work, tending and pruning.

[4 : 35] we see this in verse chapter 2. We see this in verse 2.

He cuts off every branch in me, that's the gardener, 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.

As I said last Sunday, Jesus wants us to come to terms with the mindset of God, the gardener. Just like when I go to all the work of planting plants in my garden and tending them, like some of you did this past summer, what do I want from those plants after all that work?

Well, I want as much delicious fruit as possible. God has that same mindset toward us, he wants to see as much good fruit as possible come from our lives.

Now, we have to be careful here that we don't misunderstand Jesus. Jesus is not saying that we need to do enough good works in order to be saved.

[5 : 53] The Bible is clear on this. We are saved and we are joined to Christ by faith, by believing in him and not because of good works.

God's saving love comes to us while we are still sinners, still guilty, still people who have sin and do sin.

But then once we are joined to Christ, we begin to grow like a branch of a plant grows. we begin to change as we drink from the nourishing sap of the vine.

We are now connected to the source of all life and of all goodness. And now because of that connection to Christ, we become able to bear good fruit.

and God, like a gardener, begins to work on us and in us and through us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

[7 : 02] And good things begin to come out of us like never before. Our overall mindset and attitude begins to change from living for myself, for my own pleasure, to now living for you, Jesus, for your pleasure.

We begin to pray more and more that same prayer that Jesus prayed. Not my will, not what I want, but your will, what you want, be done, Father.

We begin to let go of that impulse that we had to store up for ourselves treasures here on earth and instead begin to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

We begin to let go of that desire to get more and more, to establish our own little kingdom here on earth, and instead we desire to see God's kingdom established.

Once we are joined to Christ, good fruit begins to grow. But here's the truth that we see coming out of Jesus' words here. God doesn't just sit back and watch this happen.

[8 : 21] Now some people do their garden in that way. They plant the seeds in the ground, they give it one good soaking, and then they just leave it. From then on, if it rains, it rains.

If a late frost comes, it comes. If the plant shoot is about to snap off without some kind of supporting stake or cage, oh well.

We might call this passive gardening, or hands-off gardening. And as it usually goes, the hands-off gardener gets from their plants what they put in, often a meager harvest.

But God is not like that with us. He is an active gardener, says Jesus here in verse 2. He is hands-on.

He is pruning and tending because he is not content for a meager harvest from our lives. Let me say that again.

[9 : 31] God is not content for a meager harvest from our lives. He wants much fruit, much good fruit.

Let's fast forward for just a second to verse 8. Verse 8, Jesus says, this is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

So, what brings glory to God the Father? That you, that I, bear much fruit, fruit, not that you and I bear slim pickings, but that we bear much fruit.

What brings glory to God the Father? That you and I show ourselves to be a disciple of Jesus, that we make it so obvious to the world that we are joined to him by our lives, by our many good words, by our many good actions, by our many good attitudes.

And now the wonderful truth here in verse 2 is that we are not left all by ourselves to do this, to make this change in ourselves happen, to bear much good fruit for God.

[11 : 01] Jesus says here in verse 2 that God himself is at work on us, on each branch of the vine to ensure that our fruitfulness increases, that the good coming from our lives grows.

And so this is why I often cringe inside when I hear people say things like, you know, it's good to be religious, it's good to believe in Jesus, so long as you don't get carried away with it, so long as you don't become too religious.

Sometimes we here in the church are even tempted to have the same mentality. Let Christ have a place in your life, but don't let him take over your whole life.

That mentality is the complete opposite of what God desires for his people, for those who are joined to Christ. If we're trying to be content with just bare minimum fruit in our lives, bare minimum Christianity, bare minimum obedience to Christ, bare minimum Bible reading, bare minimum prayer, bare minimum fellowship, bare minimum church involvement, if we're trying to be content with bare minimum Christianity, we are completely at odds with what God is looking for and working toward in our lives.

He doesn't want bare minimum fruit. He wants much fruit. Think about this. Whenever you feel that temptation, and we all feel it, to do bare minimum Christianity, know this.

[12 : 50] God wants the exact opposite for you, and he is going to work on you. He is going to work in you, he's going to work around you to make you more fruitful.

He's going to bring his pruning shears to bear on you. Well, that doesn't sound good, that sounds kind of scary, but deep down inside, we know it's good.

I mean, what kind of person do you want to be? Do you want to be like the Lord Jesus? Loving, compassionate, doing what's right, joyful?

Do you want your life to be full of that? Or do you want to be like everyone else in the world, where it's just all about me, selfish, stubborn, greedy, often miserable, doing whatever I want and whatever I feel like?

hear this, God's pruning comes, not because he's harsh, not because he's just utilitarian, not because he's like that commercial grower that only cares about the profitability of the plant, no, God's pruning comes because he is good, because he is loving, because he is kind, because he wants from us what is what's actually best for us, what someday we'll realize is what we really wanted and needed all along in our lives.

[14 : 29] God's pruning makes the difference between us getting to the end of our lives and being filled with regret at a wasted life as we watch everything slip away from us, realizing that it doesn't last, that we didn't do anything for the life to come.

God's pruning makes a difference between that and us being able to look back and see that our lives made a real lasting difference for eternity.

So let's talk about pruning. When it comes to ordinary plants, there are different kinds of pruning. Probably the one that most of us have done or are most familiar with is like the kind we do when we prune the hedge or when we prune the bush.

We do it so that it has a nice shape and so that it looks good so it's not all gangly and straggly. That's not the kind of pruning that Jesus is talking about here.

He says that the kind of pruning God does is for a very specific purpose. It's to maximize fruit production on each and every branch.

[15 : 44] Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. So we might wonder how does pruning lead to more fruit?

Well I'm going to be honest with you. I'm not a plant scientist or an expert on plants but the gist of it is something like this. As a plant grows it will often put energy and resources into other smaller branches and leaves that are not necessary for fruit.

It's a plant. Being a plant it doesn't have a mind. It just kind of does what plants do. It's not thinking about maximizing the fruit. It's just following the programming that's inside of it for the kind of organism that God made it to be.

It's like a complex living automated machine and it just kind of unfolds and does what it does. But then when you introduce an intelligent mind, a gardener, into the picture, a gardener can take this automated living machine and tweak it and make changes to it and tune it so that this machine is more beneficial, produces more fruit.

That's the kind of pruning that God does on us. If the goal is maximum fruit, then not every little branch, not every little leaf is needed on the plant.

[17 : 19] In unscientific terms, some of the plant's energy and resources are going towards more green growth rather than fruit.

But there's a way to channel more of the plant's energy and resources into the production of fruit. How? By cutting off those smaller branches and leaves that are not needed for fruit production.

According to Jesus, this is the kind of pruning that God is doing for his people. He wants much fruit and so he is cleaning off from each branch the unnecessary shoots and leaves.

at the least, this means that God is at work on us and in us, making changes to our lives.

Now, I would have loved to have been there with the disciples and Jesus and probably at this point just put up my hand and ask the question, so Jesus, what exactly does the pruning of God look like in our lives?

[18 : 27] What kind of changes does he make so that we bring more fruit? But since I wasn't there, we're left to kind of take a guess at how God prunes his people.

It doesn't say right here in the passage. And I see two different ways that God prunes his people. The first way is the way that most of us, most teachers, most pastors probably think of first.

And the second way is in verse 3. So let's start with the first way that God prunes his people. Most Christians look at this and agree that God prunes his people by his sovereign work in them, on them, and around them.

Now what do I mean by that? Let me give you some examples. Just like with a branch of a plant, God sometimes removes and strips off unnecessary things.

from our lives. Maybe he sees that our energy and our resources are going towards this and that and this way and that way instead of toward producing fruit.

[19 : 39] And so sometimes he takes away things that would become a hindrance or a distraction for us. Sometimes he closes the door on an opportunity that we'd only be taking for earthly gain, for ourselves, for our own benefit.

there was a young man who loved to play high school football and football became the most important thing in his life.

Jesus was secondary. One day when he was playing, he was badly injured. It was bad enough that he would not be able to play competitively again.

Yet in the midst of his crushed ambitions, God was at work in his life, drawing his heart closer, closer to relationship with him.

And this young man gave himself more fully, more deeply to Jesus and to following him. He had a totally different path than he thought he would go on.

[20 : 38] He ended up serving the Lord in all kinds of wonderful ways, directing a Bible camp, serving as a pastor. just like when you prune a branch on a plant. It forever changes the direction of the growth.

I know another young man who deeply longed to be married, but after his first relationship didn't work out, he was crushed. God used that also in the same similar sort of way to draw his heart closer, to get his attention, to make him into a compassionate young man.

Then he started dating another gal and that didn't work out either. Then he started dating a third young lady and by that time he longed so much to be married that he would have married her if she would have had him, but then all of a sudden she broke up with him.

Finally, he tried one last time with a fourth young lady and this time it all worked out. And to this day this individual would tell you that he is so glad God didn't let him marry any of the first three girls because the wife that he has now he recognizes is the perfect companion for him and for the kind of ministry that they're doing together.

Just like with a plant, we sometimes don't know what changes need to be made in our lives to bring more good fruit. Truly, only God the gardener knows what's best for each one of us.

[22 : 20] Think about this. If we were in charge of writing our own life story from beginning to end, we probably, most of us, wouldn't include any of those pruning kinds of things.

Things that are painful. injuries, sicknesses, loss, hardships, failures, broken relationships.

Maybe you're going through some of those things right now. But could it be that the very trouble in your life that you're facing is the pruning work of God?

God working on you and in you, in his love, to set you up to bear more good fruit in your life for higher joys than you ever thought possible.

Does God do this sort of thing? There are other passages of scripture that tell us yes. The author of Hebrews is likely talking about the same sort of thing with a different metaphor, with that of the father-child relationship and discipline.

[23 : 35] This is what he says in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 5. He says, 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 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves.

And he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as his children.

For what children are not disciplined by their father? And if we skip down to verse 10, they are earthly fathers, disciplined us for a little while as they thought best.

God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.

[24 : 37] Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. It's a similar sort of idea.

God uses things that are difficult and painful hardship to bring loving correction for our good, for our benefit, so that there will be a harvest, so that there will be fruit that comes from our lives, that we may share in his holiness.

James, in his letter, says a similar sort of thing. James 1, verse 2, he writes, consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Here, God speaks of how we should welcome trials in our lives because God produces good character.

He produces maturity in us through them. Good fruit, much good fruit. So yes, God will at times bring the pruning shears to bear on our lives.

[26 : 04] Jesus says so. Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful. But isn't it a comfort to know that God is the one who holds the pruning shears of hardship in his hand?

Isn't it a comfort to know that God is the one who allows loss and difficulty and illness for a purpose?

purpose, not just willy-nilly, but for a purpose, to cut off the right leaves and the unnecessary shoots in our lives, for maximum fruit, maximum good to come from us and for us.

And it isn't easy to go through this, to be pruned by the gardener. Think about the story of Job. what did he say?

He said, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Job was pruned. Look at all that he lost. He lost everything.

[27 : 15] God took it away from him and no, Job didn't know in the midst of it why, what God's purpose was. Not until the very end when God finally brought about all the good that he intended through it.

And he was able to look back and say that his life was far more blessed after than it was before. So that's the first kind of pruning.

The kind that we usually think of when we read Jesus' words here. Our minds often go to trials and hardships, difficulties that God uses in our lives, to the ways that God sovereignly directs our lives to keep us on track, going in the right direction.

But then we come to verse 3. Jesus, speaking to his disciples, says, you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Maybe you're wondering like I was this week, what on earth does that mean? What does it have to do with all this talk of pruning and branches? You might be wondering.

[28 : 30] If you have the latest NIV in front of you, you'll notice that there's a footnote that goes with the word prunes in verse 2. You can look down to the bottom of the page and it says this, the Greek for he prunes also means he cleans.

So in Greek, the verb that they used to describe pruning was just simply clean, to clean. They didn't have a more specific word like we do in English.

So what Jesus says here in verse 3, it is connected to what he said in verse 2. God prunes each branch to bear more fruit.

Literally, he cleans each branch of its unneeded growth so that it bears even more fruit. But now Jesus says to his disciples, you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Now I'm going to just be honest with you. I'm not 100% sure what Jesus means by this. I looked at some good commentaries, I checked out some other sources and other teachers and what they say, and it seems that they're somewhat unclear about it as well.

[29 : 45] Jesus has been known already in this gospel to kind of make a play on this word clean. We saw that already when Jesus washed the disciples' feet and Peter talked about getting a whole bath and Jesus says, no, you're already clean, but not every one of you, referring to Judas.

So there's a couple different ideas that people have about these words. Some think that this means that the disciples are already saved, that they're already made righteous through faith in Jesus.

Of course, Judas is not with them at this moment. He's gone out of the room to work out his betrayal. Another idea is that this is a figure of speech. Not that Jesus is saying, you are already pure or you are already free from sin, but that Jesus is saying, don't worry.

You guys, as you are right now, are already in the place that God wants you to be. He's pleased with you because you've accepted and believed my word. A third idea is that we should translate this word clean in verse 3 as pruned.

You are already pruned. Not that you'll never need more pruning, but that for now, God has been doing that pruning at the right moments in each of your lives.

[31 : 05] And for right now, you are ready. You are set up to bear much good fruit. Again, these are guesses at what Jesus means when he says, you are already clean or you are already pruned.

But one thing we can say for sure is why and how they got that way. Jesus says, you are already clean or pruned because of the word I have spoken to you.

At the very least, I think Jesus means to say that God's pruning work doesn't just come by altering our circumstances sacrifices or by taking things away in our lives.

It seems that Jesus is pointing to a second way that God prunes his people, that he prunes them through the words of Jesus. Perhaps we might say it this way, not all change in our lives has to come the hard way.

Could it be that Jesus has often spoken and commanded and corrected and rebuked? And these disciples, they have often believed and embraced and obeyed and accepted his words, leading to real change in their lives.

[32 : 25] If this is what Jesus means, then God's pruning work in our lives can come also through the words of Jesus and us simply believing them and obeying them, doing what he said, putting our energy and our resources into the things that he's told us to do.

And this makes sense when we hear Jesus say things like he did in the Sermon on the Mount. Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear, but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

If you think about these words, this word right here is a pruning word. It's God speaking through Jesus, telling us that we should put our energy and our resources over here towards fruit production and not over here to the things that are unnecessary.

And so if we simply accept this and believe it and obey it, God is at work in us doing the pruning, bringing about the good fruit that he desires in our lives. and if we disregard these words, if we don't listen to these words, well, maybe God then might bring the other sort of pruning into our lives and put us in a situation where we can no longer look to these things.

So let me recap a little bit and just bring this to a close. God is not content for a meager harvest from our lives.

[34 : 06] When we believe in Jesus and are joined to him, he wants our lives to overflow with goodness. And we can and we will so long as we remain in close relationship with Jesus, the source of that goodness, walking closely with him.

And praise the Lord. Lord, we're not left to ourselves to do this. We often falter. We often fail. But the one who never falters and never fails is at work in us and on us and around us, carefully pruning us through the words that he speaks and the ways he directs our path.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank you that you do not leave us to ourselves.

We know that we would fall, we would falter, we would flunk out of it. Thank you that you love us enough to do the pruning, to allow the hard things to come into our lives.

thank you that one day every single one of us who believes in your name and belongs to Jesus will get to the end of our lives and look back and not see that it was all a waste.

[35 : 40] we love you and we pray and ask that you would produce much fruit in each one of us through our church.

We pray that this whole community would see that we are your disciples Jesus. We ask this for your glory and your name. Amen.

Amen.