



THE VINE & the Branches



Part 3: How the Father
Makes Us More Fruitful



Introduction

In the first two verses of the John 15 allegory about *The Vine and the Branches*, we have already been deeply touched by the words of the Master Teacher. As the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus has graciously revealed Himself in His final hours to His eleven apostles as the true Vine. Before the whole world, but first to these appointed vessels near the Mount of Olives, He unveiled His glorious beauty and the Father's unconditional and abiding love for each one of His children, the branches. As the great "I Am" – the *absolute I* and the *absolute personality* - Jesus condescended to our own creaturely limitations by using the language of a poet, comparing one thing with another to help us grasp eternal truths through the wonder of one of His own creations: the grapevine.



Introduction

Whether Jesus and the disciples actually passed by a vineyard that night is unimportant. The land promised to the children of Israel was “a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey” (Deut. 8:8). On the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion, the Eleven were walking on the very land that God had promised to Abraham. Following the death of Moses, Joshua had reminded the Israelites of God’s words to them: “I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant” (Josh. 24:13). Archaeologists tell us that Palestine appears to have been a vine-growing country with countless wine presses from the earliest historic times.

Introduction

Therefore, we can be assured that the disciples were quite familiar with vineyards and clearly understood the teaching of Jesus' 306-word allegory. Today, however, we are removed from this conversation by almost two millennia, and most of us are not intimately acquainted with vineyards and the intricacies of planting, managing, and reaping quality grapes. It is our task, therefore, to think carefully about the principles of biblical interpretation and learn the true meaning of Jesus' allegory as He intended it to be understood and as the disciples would have understood it on their way to Gethsemane. As we noted in our last lecture, the interpretation of words is critical. Does the Vinedresser "take away" the branches that do not bear fruit, or does He "lift them up" from the dirt and mud in order to restore them to fruitfulness?



Introduction

R.C. Sproul reminds us that “whatever else the Bible is, it is a book which communicates information verbally. That means that it is filled with words. Thoughts are expressed through the relationship of those words. Each individual word contributes something to the whole of the content expressed. The better we understand the individual words used in biblical statements, the better we will be able to understand the total message of Scripture.” And so, as we continue to explore Jesus’ teaching on the relationships between the Vinedresser, the Vine, and the branches, our next question can only be answered by studying another word - the main verb - in verse 2 which is usually translated by our English word, *prunes*. “Every branch that bears fruit, He *prunes* it...”

Five Translations of John 15:2

- “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, **He prunes it**, that it may bear more fruit” (Jn. 15:2, NASV).
- “...every branch that does bear fruit **he trims clean** so that it will be even more fruitful” (NIV).
- “...Every branch that does bear fruit **he prunes**, that it may bear more fruit” (ESV).
- “...and **he prunes the branches** that do bear fruit so they will produce even more” (NLT).
- “...every branch that is grape-bearing **he prunes back** so it will bear even more” (*The Message*, Eugene Peterson).



Jesus' Emphasis on Fruit-Bearing

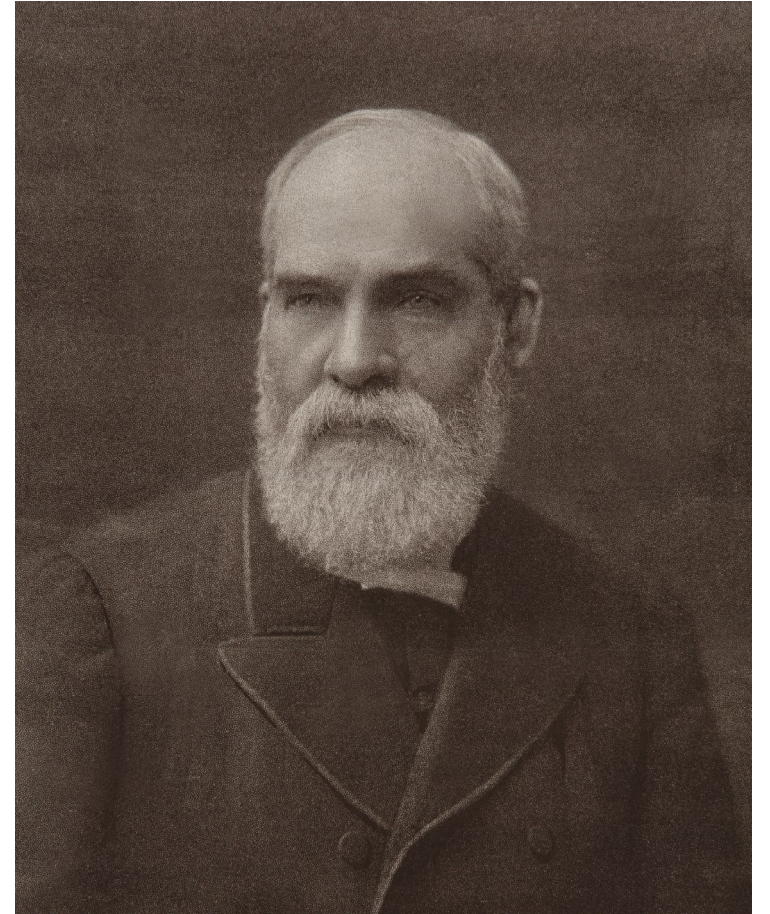
We will consider the biblical concept of fruitfulness later in the series. For the moment, we will only introduce the following three ideas:

1. The Greek word for fruit occurs 66 times in the New Testament.
2. "John uses *karpos* (fruit) 8 times in 15:1-16, and twice only (4:36; 12:24) in all the rest of his Gospel." (Leon Morris).
3. There are three kinds of fruit that the Father is seeking to cultivate in us: (1) the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22); (2) the fruit which comes as a result of our sharing the gospel with unbelievers (Rom. 1:13); and the fruit of righteousness (Phil. 1:11). Or, to say it another way, the **fruit of our character**, the **fruit of our evangelistic efforts**, and the **fruit of good works**.

A.B. Bruce on the Meaning of *Fruit*

“The fruit He looks for is the spread of the gospel and the ingathering of souls into the kingdom of God by the disciples, in the discharge of their apostolic vocation. Personal holiness is not overlooked; but it is required rather as a means towards fruitfulness than itself the fruit. It is the purging of the branch which leads to increased fertility.”

- *The Training of the Twelve*



A.B. Bruce
1831-1899



The Goal: Quality Wine

“You can make poor-quality wine out of high-quality grapes, but you cannot expect to make great wine from poor-quality grapes. Growing high-quality grapes for premium wine requires the grower to fully understand the principles of viticulture.”



Enemies of the Vine

- Pathogens: fungi, bacteria, virus, and nematodes.
- Diseases: knots, blackened areas or rot on the root system, discoloration in the inner stem tissue, stem lesions, leaf spots, cankers/blisters, downy mildew, eutypa dieback, and leaf malformation.
- Insects: caterpillars, moths, beetles, aphids, leafhoppers, plant bugs, sucking insects, Japanese beetle, green June beetle, multicolored Asian lady beetle, rose chafer, western grapeleaf skeletonizer, mealybugs, mites, and thrips.
- Weeds, weather, water, wildlife (birds, deer, gophers, barn owls), etc.

“Disease is infectious, but health is not” (J.C. Ryle)



“The cultivation of
the vine requires
constant care, or
the fruit will very
soon degenerate.”

E.W.G. Masterman
ISBE

The Constant Care of Our Heavenly Father

“God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”



The Westminster Assembly

Westminster Abbey
Jerusalem Chamber
1643-1653



J.I. Packer: Knowing Our Vinedresser

- “Knowing God is more than knowing about Him; it is a matter of dealing with Him as He opens up to you and being dealt with by Him as He takes knowledge of you.”
- “The initiative throughout is with God – as it must be, since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on His favor by our sins. *We* do not make friends with *God*; *God* makes friends with *us*, bring us to know Him by making His love known to us”...God takes the “initiative in loving, choosing, redeeming, calling, and preserving.”

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Ps. 34:8).



The Decisive Role of the Father in the Vineyard

- So that the branches may become more productive and bear more fruit, the Father acts **to increase the yield of the vine**.
- The word John uses to describe the Father's activity is *kathairo* (*catharsis*: to cleanse, purge), which means **to make clean**. It is used literally of a place that has been swept. When used of a vine, it means **clear or prune** by removing the superfluous wood (Arndt & Gingrich).
- This word is only used 2 times in the N.T., in John 15:2 and Heb. 10:2. But a later Hellenistic form, *katharidzo*, literally means **to make clean, cleanse, purify**.
- The verb is present indicative active (He cleanses or prunes) and is used in the sense of "cleansing by pruning" (Rogers & Rogers).



A.W. Pink: *Prune or Cleanse?*

“The majority of people imagine that *purges*, here, is the equivalent of *pruning*, and understand the reference is to affliction, chastisement, and painful discipline. But the word *purges* here does not mean *pruning*; it would be better rendered *cleanses*, as it is in the very next verse [‘You are already **clean** because of the word which I have spoken to you’ (vs. 3)]. It may strike some of us as rather incongruous to speak of *cleansing* a branch of a vine. It would not be so if we were familiar with the Palestinian vineyards. The reference is to the washing off of the deposits of insects, of moss, and other parasites which infest the plant. Now the ‘water’ which the Vinedresser uses in cleansing the branches is *the Word*, as 15:3 tells us. The thought, then, is the removal

A.W. Pink: Prune or Cleanse?

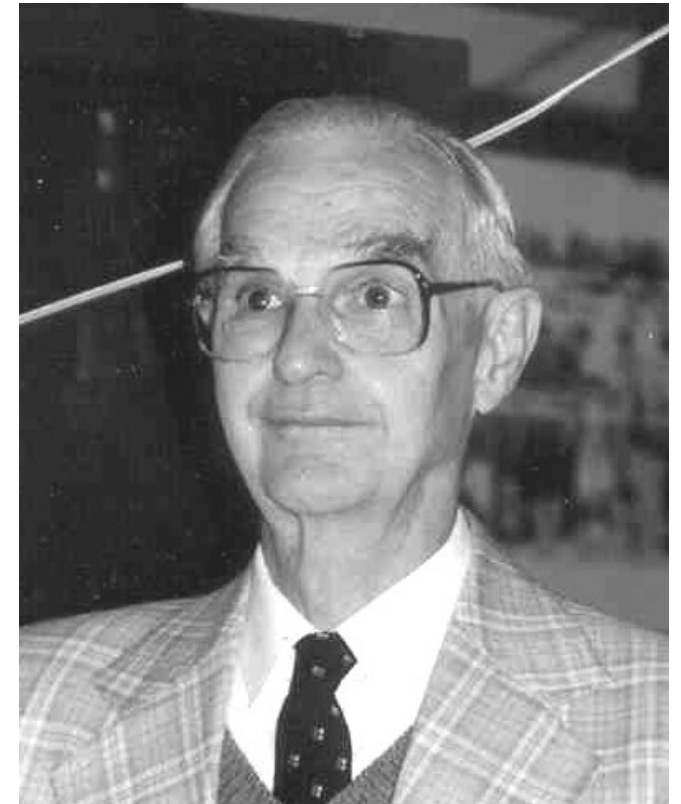


by the Word of what would obstruct the flow of the life and fatness of the vine through the branches. Let it be clearly understood that this *purging* is *not* to fit the believer for Heaven (that was accomplished, once for all, the first moment that faith rested upon the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ), but is designed to make us more fruitful, while we are here in this world.”

Another Argument Against *Pruning*

In ancient Greek literature, there is “no example of the verb with the meaning *prune*...It is often said that the word can mean *prune*, but M.J. Lagrange denies this...Dodd is also skeptical about its use for pruning. He does not find the word in a number of documents referring to viticulture, and he concludes, ‘I do not think it was a word which a vine-grower would naturally have used.’”

“The action of the Father is such as to **cleanse** His people so that they will live fruitful lives.”



Leon Morris, PhD
Australian New Testament Scholar
1914-2006 (aged 92)

We Are Cleansed at the New Birth

- At the Last Supper, Jesus tells eleven of His disciples that they are **clean**. “Jesus said to him, ‘He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is **completely clean**; and **you are clean**, but not all of you (Judas Iscariot)’” (Jn. 13:10).
- “And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, **cleansing their hearts by faith**” (Acts 15:8-9).
- “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, **having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word**” (Eph. 5:25-26).

We Are Cleansed at the New Birth

- “...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, **cleanse your conscience from dead works** to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:14).
- “And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are **cleansed with blood**, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).
- “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. **Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts**, you doubleminded” (James 4:8).
- “...the blood of Jesus His Son **cleanses us from all sin**” (1 Jn. 1:7).
- “...when He had made **purification of sins**, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3).

Sanctification

Q.75: What is sanctification?

A.: “Sanctification is a work of God’s grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.”

- Westminster Larger Catechism

We Are Continually *Being* Cleansed

- Christ Jesus “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and **purify for Himself** a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14).
- “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to **cleanse** us from all unrighteousness” (I Jn. 1:9).
- “And such were some of you; but you were **washed**, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” (II Cor. 6:11).
- “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the **washing** of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).



How God Cleanses His Branches

- “You are already clean because of the **word** which I have spoken to you” (Jn. 15:3).
- **The Word of God is a means of grace.** Grace is God’s unmerited favor, and we need it “not only at the beginning of the Christian life, but throughout it...God never leaves his church alone...The Holy Spirit accompanies the Word, enabling people to receive it, ‘not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.’...The Word is active not only in our initial salvation, but throughout our lives, especially in our sanctification” (John Frame).



What About Pruning?

- **Prune**, v., to cut branches or twigs from (a vine, tree, shrub, etc.) in order to regulate growth and promote flowering or fruit production (OED).
- “To train the vine for maximum yield the vinedresser had to prune excessive branches. The time of pruning was after the winter was over, usually during the fall before the vines became dormant. It involved cutting into the wood. This needed to be done in the fall lest there be new vegetative growth at the cut. For the first five years, the plant needed the fall pruning every year; thereafter only every third year” (Rogers and Rogers).



Dormant Pruning

“Dormant pruning is a critical component of wine grape production used to control the size and shape of the grapevine, maintain the balance between shoot and fruit growth in order to optimize the production potential of the grapevine. If the vine is left unpruned, the number of grape clusters would be excessive resulting in a reduced rate of sugar accumulation, reduced pigmentation in the berry skins, and decreased synthesis of flavor and aroma constituents. Other negative effects include poor wood maturation and a reduction in vigor and vine size.”

- *Grape Gower's Handbook: A Guide to Viticulture for Wine Production*



Pruned Vineyard in Late Autumn



How We Might Understand *Pruning*

“Though the Father, as the husbandman, wields the pruning-knife, the process of purging cannot be carried on without our consent and co-operation. For that process means practically the removal of moral hindrances to life and growth – the cares of life, the insidious influence of wealth, the lusts of the flesh, and the passions of the soul – evils which cannot be overcome unless our will and all our moral powers be brought to bear against them. Hence, Jesus lays it upon His disciples as a *duty* to abide in Him, and have Him abiding in them, and resolves the whole matter at last, in plain terms, into keeping His commandments.”

- A.B. Bruce



Conclusion

“The word *cleanses*, which is used of lustrations (purifications), appears to be chosen with a view to its spiritual application. Everything is removed from the branch which tends to divert the vital power from the production of fruit.”

- B.F. Westcott