

The Upper Room

Sermon #5: The Vinedresser

John 15:1-11

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- April 2, 2023

Well, today's lesson, I would say is rated M for mature audiences only. We're in John chapter 15 if you want to join me. We're going to learn about the Gardener. And when I say "mature," I don't mean people who have been going to church for a long time or who have been in a Bible study for thirty-five years and have been teaching it for twenty years. That's not the definition of maturity. A mature believer is a person who is not who they used to be because they have chosen to yield themselves to the direction of the Holy Spirit.

And today I think this passage is going to give perspective and help you make sense out of some of your past if you're a mature believer. And some of your history, if you don't understand it, or maybe your current situation, I think today might help with that.

And for future mature believers, it's managing expectations, knowing what the gardener's going to do in our lives to produce fruit.

There's a famous sentence that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. You're going to love the destination. The journey—I've got to tell you, sometimes it's not so fun. Emerson said, "It's not the destination, it's the journey." No, sometimes I think it's the destination. The journey hurts.

Here's what's happening. Jesus is on His way. He's just finished the communion Passover meal and He's on His way to pray His last prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane. And on His way, He probably comes upon a vineyard and then stops, grabs His eleven disciples, and says, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener." This is the last formal teaching of Jesus. And He's teaching us how soul change happens. He's going to teach us our part, which was last week. And this week He's going to talk about the Father's part—what does the gardener do in the midst of soul change? Bearing fruit is key.

Two Actions of the Gardener

John 15:1-3

I am the vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He lifts up 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Today, let's look at what two things, what two activities, two actions, the gardener does. Let's look at chapter 15, verses 1 through 3. It says, "I am the true vine." (This is Jesus.) "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He lifts up 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. You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."

John 15:4-5, 8

Remain in me, and I will 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. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciple.

Last week—a quick summary here—"You remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain on the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

"I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

Let's do a quick review of Vine Growing 101 so we can better understand this metaphor that's so important to knowing the nature of our soul change, but particularly this week, what the vine grower, what the gardener is going to do.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine." The vine would be like the trunk of a tree coming up out of the ground, where are the nutrients are. It's coming up through the vine. This is the vine. It's about waist high and splits off, usually, left and right, horizontally. And it's going to go in each direction that way.



It says the Father is the gardener, He's the vinedresser. He will do whatever it takes to produce the most and the best grapes. Jesus says we're the branches. For the branches there will be a trellis that's holding up a vine, but there will be lines of string going across horizontally. And as the branches come along and they grow, the vinedresser is going to make sure they stay on those twines, those trellises, so that it gets them off the dirt, off the mud, and gets them exposed to the most air possible and the most sun, so they can grow the most fruit.



The goal of each and every branch—the goal of the follower of Jesus Christ—is fruit, more fruit, much fruit. It says it multiple times.

What Is the Fruit?

What's the fruit? Again, just reviewing from last week—what is the fruit? To become like Christ. In a word, to be holy. God says, “You be holy as I am holy.” That fruit of holiness glorifies God. That's why the chief end of all of this is, according to verse 8, “This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples”—showing yourselves to be holy.

So, if the Church is to look like this, but we, the branches, look like this, then the vinedresser has a lot of work cut out for Him.



There are two action which the gardener does. We're going to look at the two actions He does so that we can bear much fruit.

What the Gardener Does: Lifts Up / Discipline

The first one is that He lifts up, and that means to discipline. He lifts up that branch. He says, "He lifts up every branch in me that bears no fruit." So, literally what happens in vine dressing is that it's the natural tendency of the branches to grow towards the ground and run along the ground. It's easier to be on the ground. And without any kind of tending or anything, even if they're on a string, they're going to grab and pull down. And once they get there there's no fruit, because they're in the dirt. They can't get air or sun. It becomes mud. Then they get mildewed. That's sick. And a sick branch can't make grapes.

And so, the vinedresser lifts them up, it says he washes them off. He's going to make sure they're on those strands of string so that they can get sunlight and air and produce fruit.

What that means for humans, what that means for the sons and daughters of Christ, is that if you don't bear fruit, if you're not showing growth in becoming like Christ, then Yahweh disciplines those He loves. The first thing we need to know is that Yahweh disciplines those He loves.

Hebrews 12:5-6

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addressed you as children—“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by Him; ⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom He loves, and chastises every child whom He accepts.

In Hebrews chapter 12, verses 5 and 6, it's pretty explicit. He's reminding us of what was told to the Hebrews before. “And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of Yahweh, or lose heart when you are punished by Him; for Yahweh disciplines those whom He loves, and He chastises every child whom He accepts.’”

It says that Yahweh disciplines those He loves. And the context here is no fruit. That means a lifestyle of sin; that means a person who is committed to not surrendering to the will of the Spirit—quenching the Spirit in their life. Something is more important than following God. And what happens a lot, in the context of discipline, is that the thing that used to bring us joy, whatever that behavior was, often leaves us. And now attached to that is anxiety and frustration. Our spiritual lives are flat.

Sometimes in the context of church we will have to move someone out of a place of influence, like teaching, and put them on the sidelines until they're coming to a place of repentance. If people don't respond to the discipline from the Lord, the next thing He says is in verse 6: “He chastises every child that He accepts.”

Usually what happens is that this individual is not just hurting themselves anymore, but they're hurting others around them. And so, God allows or inflicts, quite often, natural and logical consequences of people's choices, so that there's a connection between this kind of choice, this kind of behavior, which leads to these kinds of results.

When we choose to pursue things other than the God Almighty himself, God says, *Okay. Have what you want. Thy will be done.* Sometimes those are physical consequences on our

bodies. Sometimes it's just attitudes—our soul becoming more sinful, more embittered, whatever it might be.

At this level, sometimes, church leadership has to actually ask the person to leave the church because they're causing more danger or they're a threat to the sheep around them. The point is that the discipline and the chastising is to lead us to repentance so that—lift us up, put us on a strand—we can bear fruit. We can become like Christ; we can become holy.

Hebrews 12:11

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

He says this in Hebrews. In verse 11, he says, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.” Yes! I'd agree to that. But “later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

If you're able to respond to that discipline and chastisement and you end up repenting, He lifts you up, He cleans you off, and you learn from it—fruit. The harvest of righteousness, the harvest of peace—there it is.

And what we're to learn here is that if you choose to live that kind of lifestyle, God himself will be the author of this discipline. He's going to do this out of love and for the purpose of the harvest, so that you would start bearing fruit.

The story of the gardener is this. He has two actions. Yahweh disciplines those He loves who are bearing no fruit.

What the Gardener Does: Prunes / Cuts Back

But what about the people who are bearing fruit? What about the people who are showing signs of Christ in their lives? He pats you on the head and says, *Great job*. That's not what happens.

John 15:2

... while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Look what it says. He says, “While every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” Pruning means cut back. So, in the literal expression of what a vinedresser or a gardener does here, He’s going to go against all the natural tendencies and inclinations of a branch—the branch’s nature. It does whatever is easiest. And what does the branch do? He’s always going to favor new growth and leaves because it’s easier than growing grapes. In other words, the branch is going to want to run as long as it can and produce leaves. But when you step back and look at it from a distance, you think, *Wow, that’s a beautiful ivy wall.* But there are very little grapes, and the grapes are bitter. It’s bitter fruit.

And so, the vinedresser has to come in and take away all things that are not necessary. He’s pruning all things unnecessary for the best and the most fruit. How much pruning? It will shock you.

I don’t know about vine dressing, so I consulted the University of Washington. They have a degree in vine dressing. And here’s what they say in their manual: “Standing in front of a mass of tangled grapevines and wondering what to do can be a scary experience for the novice or even for the more experienced pruner. Keep in mind two essential ideas:

“One, don’t be afraid to cut. When you finish, about 90% of last year’s growth will be cut back.

“Two, grape plants are vigorous, and forgiving. Even if you make a mistake, you’ll get a chance to fix it next year.”

This is a metaphor for our lives, okay? This is the pruning before; this is the pruning after. Yeah.

Wait a minute---hey, hey, hey! Lord, I’m producing fruit here. I’ve become a pretty nice person. You can ask around.

And God says, *I’m not trying to make you a nice person. I’m trying to make you holy. You be holy as I am holy.* You’re going to become like Jesus if Jesus were you. That’s the goal. This right here—the pruning—this is where good Christians who don’t know the vinedresser get stalled. This is a place where, because of the radical pruning, people who have been walking

with God will grow bitter or sometimes reject Him, because they misunderstand Yahweh. They misunderstand His methods. They don't know His motives. This is a dangerous subject for anyone to be ignorant of.

He's not cutting away bad. He's not cutting away bad values or attitudes or even actions. He's cutting away immature things, the nonessentials. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness"—*no, really*. If it's second, there's going to be pruning.

It's when we're being pruned that we're often coming to the realization that what we really want is God's blessing instead of, maybe, God's presence, or to be like Him. Know this: that Yahweh will discipline those He loves and Yahweh will prune those He loves who are bearing fruit.

Remember, pruning goes against all the nature of what a branch will do, all the inclinations, all the biases, all the easy stuff that branches do. Pruning goes against all the natural inclinations of ourselves. And our self is always somehow trying to make it about me, or trying to make life easy. He's not trying to make us good ol' boys from West Texas; He's trying to make us like Christ.

This is the point—this is the theme of this teaching. It is this. You can't get that kind of fruit without that kind of pruning. Yahweh prunes those whom He loves. Let's say that together. "Yahweh prunes those He loves." You might be saying that in a prayer, a whisper, someday soon. It's the only way to get that kind of fruit. If there were another way, He would choose that.

Once you see this, you can't un-see it. It's everywhere throughout the Bible. You can't get that kind of fruit without that kind of pruning.

You look at the story of Abraham. He is promised by God himself that he will have so many descendants, and they're going to own real estate and be famous around the world. And his life is a life of pruning. He has faith beyond hope. When he dies he has one legitimate heir and the only real estate he owns is a graveyard. You can't get that kind of fruit without that kind of pruning. And he's known as the friend of God—the friend of God—because of that pruning.

Moses is raised as an Egyptian prince with every privilege imaginable. And then as an adult, he chooses to align himself with his people, the Jews. He breaks up a brawl, more than likely accidentally killing an Egyptian to do that. In our courts, it would be justifiable manslaughter. And what does he get for that? Forty years of pruning, shepherding in the desert. He must have been saying at some hilltop covered in dirt, *I didn't do anything wrong. How much*

is Pharaoh's sin going to cost me and all of Israel? And there's no answer you could give to him. Not at that time. But you could know that you can't get the kind of fruit that comes out in Moses without the kind of pruning that Moses endures.

In Numbers chapter 12, God describes Moses as, "Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."

Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous older brothers, and they were jealous because of his terrible father making him the favorite child. While a prisoner in slavery, he was accused of sexual assault—falsely accused. He becomes a prisoner. While in prison he's left there for how long—years? He's promised to be remembered and set free; he's forgotten.

It's the longest story in the Book of Genesis. And the point is the sovereignty of God. In his forgotten prison, Joseph, I'm sure, was pondering, *I didn't do anything wrong. How much are my brothers' sins going to cost me? And what about the dreams you gave me, Yahweh? How are those going to come true?* There's no answer for that—not in that prison.

But this is true. You can't have the fruit of Joseph without the kind of pruning that Joseph received. Did you know there's no tribe of Joseph in the twelve tribes? There's no tribe of Joseph. He receives a double inheritance. There are two tribes from Joseph, his two sons—all because Yahweh prunes those He loves, the ones who are bearing fruit.

David is the forgotten son of his own father on the day of his anointing to become the next king of Israel. And as he waits to fulfill that as a young teenager, he solves the problem that has King Saul's name written all over it—some giant named something—Goliath—yeah, that's it. And what does David receive for giving hope back to Israel? He is hunted like a wild dog by this insanely jealous, paranoid king.

And David cries out from the caves of En Gedi, *I didn't do anything wrong. How much is Saul's sin going to cost me? And what about that anointing? How is that ever going to happen?* And there's no answer.

But this is true. You can't have that kind of fruit in David's life without that kind of pruning that he endured. He has a nickname. He's called the friend of God.

Here's another one. Daniel is called in the Bible a righteous young man. Jerusalem is besieged, his parents likely killed. He was most certainly castrated so that he could serve in the king's court that destroyed his family and his nation. And Daniel wonders in the lion's den, *I did*

nothing wrong. And Yahweh is supposed to be sovereign. Does He have a plan? Does He have the power to make the plan happen? It's hard to tell from the lion's den.

But you can't become like Daniel, with that kind of fruit, without that kind of pruning. And Daniel will outlive three kings and two kingdoms. And he will be given the details of the sovereign Yahweh's plan for all of creation and its culmination. Yeah, he's in control.

Do you have time for another story this morning? Esther, a teen orphan girl who is torn out of the arms of her guardian uncle so she could try out to be queen of an enraged king—and “try out” means that she's going to lose her virtue by being raped by this maniac whose temper is so notorious and legendary it is still taught in colleges around the world. That's how insane this man is. And Esther is called to courage, that she would go and risk her life and interrupt and invade one of this king's meetings so she could ask for her people to defend themselves against a soon coming slaughter. You can bet Esther was weeping in her chamber and wondering, *I did nothing wrong.*

But here's what's true. You can't go from a victim to a conqueror and have that kind of fruit without that kind of pruning. And Esther does go and interrupt a meeting, and the king responds, and the Jews are able to defend themselves. Have you read how it ends? Because it says, “And the Jews, with the sword, slaughtered all who hated the Jews.” And now the king is reporting to the queen. Listen to this: “And the king said to Queen Esther, ‘In the citadel of Susa the Jews have killed five hundred people and also the ten sons of Haman.’” (It was Haman's idea to try and extinguish the Jews.) “ ‘And now what is your petition that it might be granted? What is your request that it might be fulfilled?’”

These are the last words that are recorded in the Bible from a kitten that's become a lioness. You didn't see this in your children's Bible studies growing up. “ ‘If it pleases the king,’ Esther answered, ‘give the Jews of Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles.’ And so, the king did what the queen said.” And they got one more day to make sure all the bad guys were destroyed. And did you know that to this day they still celebrate that conquest of evil? They call it a feast. It's called the Feast of Purim—because Esther was pruned to become Queen Esther.

Yahweh prunes those He loves, the ones who bear fruit. Let's say that out loud: “Yahweh prunes those He loves.”

Yahweh disciplines those who are choosing to live in sin and He prunes those who are bearing fruit. And what are we to do? Those are the two activities of the gardener. What are we to do?

We Are to Remain

Well, we saw last week that we are to remain, abide, cling to, hang in there, with truth and love that leads to obedience.

John 15:1, 4

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener ...

⁴ Remain in me, and I will 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.

Look what it says in verse 1, and then we'll jump to verse 4. It says eleven times in eleven verse, but we'll just summarize. "I am the true vine, my Father is the gardener ... Remain in me, and I will 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."

Here's the point. Remain, especially when you're being disciplined; most especially when you're being pruned and it just doesn't make sense. You must stay connected. Because it is the branches that are connected to the vine, and the vine is the trunk that leads to the triune God that brings you all your nurture. You must stay dependent, especially then. Especially then, when it's most reasonable to leave, He says to cling even more so. In light of what the vinedresser, the gardener is doing, remain in His truth.

John 15:7

If you remain in me and my words remain in you ...

Look what He says in verse 7: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you ..." "Let the words of Christ richly dwell within you ..."

John 15:9-10

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love.

He says, "Remain in my love." It's truth and love. "As the Father has loved me, I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I obeyed the Father's command and I remain in His love." We're to remain in truth and love of the true vine.

Summary: Abide in Truth and in Love

What does that even mean? It means now, knowing the gardener, that He'll be disciplining those who bear no fruit and pruning those who do bear fruit, He said, "Abide, cling to, remain, don't let go when you're being disciplined for no fruit. Abide, cling to, remain, drink the sap of love and truth, most especially while you're being pruned for growing fruit."

In other words, you cling to what you know about truth and love, about the nature of God that you can know, in the context of life that you can't understand. You can know things about God because of the word and the truth in you and the love of God that leads to obedience. That you can cling to. That's certain. That's the anchor here in a world that doesn't make sense. And you know this about God: Yahweh is sovereign. He does have a plan. And He has the power to make the plan work.

And know this: that Yahweh is loving. We sang, "You are good, You are good, oh, You are good. And You'll never let us down." We have song that "You are a good, good Father." I think those are the only lyrics. We just keep singing them until it gets through to us.

Remain in the truth. You've got to remain in the love when you're saying, *I don't understand! I'm growing fruit here!*

There once was a man who lived in the land of Uz and his name was Job. And it says that he was blameless and upright and he feared God and he avoided all kinds of evil. That's Job 1:1. In Job 1:8, the Lord himself, Yahweh, says to Satan, "Have you seen my servant Job? Let me

describe him for you. There's none like him in all of earth. He is blameless and upright. He fears God and avoids all evil."

And Satan says, "Yeah? Well, prune him. Prune him back ... way back. And he'll curse you like so many others who don't know your ways."

I would imagine ... you can read it in the Bible ... that he was grinding his teeth and he was saying, I did nothing wrong! And he didn't. But you can't have the kind of fruit that Job has without the kind of pruning that Job received. And so, he had to remain, cling to, abide in this truth: that Yahweh is sovereign. And he had to abide in the love of God that led to obedience.

John 13:31-32

When therefore Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; ³² if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in himself, and will glorify Him immediately."

Last story—Jesus, the King of glory. That's His title. This Upper Room starts with this in chapter 13. "When therefore Judas had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in himself, and He will glorify Him immediately.'" Yeah, "glorified" five times.

But actually, the critical word here is "now." Now it begins. The Son will glorify the Father, and the Son will be glorified in the Father. *Because now I begin my march to Golgotha*, which is the climax of the obedience of the Son to the Father's will because of His love. "For God so loved the world He gave His Son ..." And the Son so loved the Father that He went. That's why He's glorified. But in that route, He ends up at the Garden of Gethsemane where He weeps blood and asks, "I did nothing wrong! How much is their sin going to cost me?" And that's why we call Him Jesus, the King of all glory.

Become like Christ and glorify God in your suffering. Become like Christ in your pruning. Become like Christ in your repentance. He never repented ... and in discipline.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, my Father is the gardener." And Yahweh loves His children so much, that if they don't bear fruit, He's going to discipline them. He'll lift them up. And those who do bear fruit are going to be pruned by Him so that they will produce more fruit and much fruit.

Knowing this, the nature of the gardener and the love of the Father, His ambition for us, one: do not grow bitter in doing good. Because if you persevere, there's a harvest of righteousness. This is where Christians become bitter. They don't know or understand the motives or the methods of this loving gardener. Two, you grieve. You grieve the fall of all creation, you grieve with creation, longing for the day of redemption. You find yourself at a level of sorrow for the way things have become like you haven't before. And the third thing is that you start caring less about more, and a lot more about a lot less. You care less about all that stuff that mattered ten years ago or twenty or last year. Because now it looks kind of immature on you, doesn't it? You care less about more, and care more about less. Care most, first, about this one thing: seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Seek first ... seek most ... seek only the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And quit caring about everything else.

Jesus said this about this teaching time, right here. *I'm telling you this so that you might have my joy in you and your joy would be complete. Now that you know what the Father's ambition is, now that you know what the gardener is going to do—you know His methods and you know His motives—let your joy be complete, even in the context of suffering. Stay, remain, cling, don't let go. Where are you going to go now that's safe? You have to cling.*

I think deep down inside—maybe this is just my story—I was hoping that God was like the cool dad. You know, the cool dad who helped me and my buddies sneak into a movie that we weren't old enough to see. Turns out God is a good dad, the good, good Father that ends up taking me to the woodshed for going to see the movie I wasn't supposed to see.

But deep down, we rejoice that He's this kind of Father, this kind of gardener, and that we can feel free to weep during our pruning. Grind your teeth, maybe even in anger, because you have grown tired of a gardener who never tires in His pruning. You have license to hurt while you're hurting. But you know these things to be true now, don't you? We're maybe making sense of your past or your present, but certainly your future. If you want to become a mature believer, you can't get this kind of fruit without this kind of pruning. He won't let us live a life without an abundance of fruit. You want this. He's going to make it happen—that you bear fruit, much fruit, and more fruit.

That's the truth of the vine. You're going to love the destination. The journey is going to hurt.

Let's pray.

Lord, I would ask that Your Spirit would maybe have us reflect back on our life story when we may have been disciplined, left to ourselves to live out the consequences of our choices because we were in rebellion towards You. And now we want to thank You for that chastisement that led to repentance and brought us back to church.

And Lord, today especially, I'd like for You to help us understand where we've been when we were bearing fruit, and yet it still seemed like we had Your wrath against us, or Your lack of protection. And now we see that instead of shaking our fist at You, we should have been hugging You. Instead of wondering if You were good, we should have been abiding in what is true, that You are sovereign and You can't possibly love us more. You did not spare Your own Son, so how do You not freely give us all things?

So, Lord, I'd ask that You would forgive our previous trespasses and misunderstandings about Your nature, and I'd ask that You would prepare us in our present and in our future, that we might endure our prunings with an awareness and an understanding of the joy that comes; our joy is complete when we glorify You as we become holy, like we were meant to be in the garden; that we would grieve the fall and the curse and that we'd long for the day of redemption like we were meant to.

And until that day comes and we see You face to face, prune away. In Jesus' name. Amen.