



# Bear Much Fruit

DISCIPLESHIP: PART 5 • JOHN 15:1-8

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Over the past several weeks, we have been looking together at what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We started by looking at some of the Lord's last words before he ascended back into heaven, and we learned that as we go out into the world, we are to make disciples by 1.) baptizing and 2.) by teaching. We looked at the word **"disciple"** (as it's found more than 260 times in the New Testament), and we learned that it refers to being a learner, and so we are to make people learners of Jesus. But, before we go making disciples, we need to know exactly what it means to be a disciple. And so, over the past several weeks, we have looking at five passages where the word is used, and we have been looking at these five passages in chronological order.

We started with the passage in Matthew 10 where Jesus explains that when we as his disciples SUBMIT to his will, and when we IMITATE his way of life, we will be PERSECUTED. So, there is something of a warning here: We need to be prepared for at least some level of opposition.

The following week, we looked at two verses in John 8 where we learned that true disciples will CONTINUE in Jesus' word, leading to FREEDOM from sin.

Two weeks ago, we looked at a passage in Luke 14 where Jesus warns a large crowd of potential disciples that they must first COUNT THE COST as they decide whether to follow the Lord as disciples.

And then, last week, we looked at two verses in John 13, where Jesus explains that as his disciples, we are to LOVE ONE ANOTHER. We learned that the love he commands is more of a decision than a feeling, and we learned that by loving sacrificially, we prove to the world around us that we are, in fact, his disciples.

This morning, we come to the last lesson in this series, and we come to a passage where Jesus gives his disciples some encouragement, and the encouragement is that they are to BEAR FRUIT. The passage is found in John 15:1-8 (p. 1686). We are still on the night before the crucifixion, and Jesus is giving his disciples some advice concerning how to keep on keeping on, over the long term, once he is gone, even when they perhaps do not feel like continuing. I don't know about all of you, but there are times when I feel as if I am running on fumes. Most of us probably understand the terminology. We think about a long car ride, we're trying to make it as far as we can before we stop, but the tank is on empty.

A year or so ago I left here after worship on a Sunday morning, headed for Washington, I was wide awake, and I didn't want to waste any time with anything so frivolous as food, a restroom stop, or fuel. So I drove and I drove and drove some more, and maybe 8 hours later finally got to the point where the needle was well below "low," so I had to stop. I had driven from this building all the way to Fargo, North Dakota, a distance of just over 500 miles. I will admit, though, that those last few miles were just a bit tense. The fuel light is on, the needle has bottomed out, I'm hungry, a restroom would have been a pretty good idea right around that point, and as you might know, there aren't too many good options just this side of Fargo. Perhaps this was a bad move. Maybe I should have stopped sooner. I am not sure I can make it!

As I think back to that particular trip, I wonder whether some of us have been there spiritually. We are tired, we seem a bit low on spiritual resources, the day is getting long, and perhaps we are thinking to ourselves: What in the world have I gotten myself into? How can we keep on going even when we might not feel like it?

As Jesus prepares his disciples to face a time like this, he gives them a picture. He makes a comparison. I hope you're in John 15 by now, and if you are, notice, please, the last verse in Chapter 14. They've been in the Upper Room - the last supper, the washing of the feet, and so on - and now, at the very end of Chapter 14, Jesus says to his disciples, **"Get up, let us go from here."** And we assume that that they did, that they left the Upper Room. So, as they are now on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus continues teaching. He's walking and talking, as he often did. And as they walk, there is a good chance that they pass by a grape vine of some kind, and on that walk, Jesus describes himself as the **"true vine"** and His Father as the **"vinedresser."** It's an incredibly simple picture, even something that a bunch of fishermen can understand. Everybody knows at least something about grapes. This is common, everyday language. And yet, as we can imagine, Jesus is not giving a lecture on how to grow grapes, is he? But instead, he's teaching a much deeper lesson, a spiritual lesson, a lesson on continuing, even when we might not feel like it, a lesson on bearing fruit. So, let us please look together at our last passage on discipleship - John 15:1-8,

**<sup>1</sup> "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.**

As Christians, when we are running on empty, when we are tired and not sure whether we can go any further, I am hoping that this passage might encourage us to keep on keeping on. We have some good reminders here, some encouraging reminders. And I know it's only been a few weeks, but it's time for us to another backwards sermon. I had a hard time digesting and absorbing this passage this week, but I think it makes sense to start at the end and to work our way back to the beginning. So, we'll have three big ideas this morning, but we will start at the end.

III. So, starting at the end of this passage, we actually begin with POINT #3 as we find that the GOAL of Jesus' instruction here is that we BEAR FRUIT, that we bear MUCH FRUIT, in fact.

And Jesus illustrates this with grapes. The goal of growing grapes is to get grapes! Everybody knows this. I have read that grapes are one of the most widely grown fruits in the world. They are grown almost everywhere. Most are used for the production of wine, with the rest being used for grape juice, fresh fruit, and a small percentage ending up as raisins - the poor, lowly, inferior rejects of the grape world (in my opinion). But the cultivation of grapes goes back thousands of years, and grapes continue to be one of the most labor-intensive crops to maintain and to harvest. But in thinking about grapes, we cannot miss the most basic truth that the point of growing grapes is to get grapes! The purpose of a grapevine is not just to look pretty. Some of you know that I grew up with grapes in our backyard. We would eat them fresh, and mom would can them as some of the most amazing grape juice that you can ever imagine.

I have continued to grow grapes here in Wisconsin over the past 26 years or so. And I can assure you (especially with the amount of labor involved): The point of growing grapes is to get grapes! They really aren't good for much of anything else. They don't really flower. They aren't really good at providing shade (there are literally thousands of other plants and trees we would go to for that). From time to time someone will make a wreath out of the old dead vines (as Meg has done up here), but by far, this is highly insignificant side effect of using what is basically the waste of getting to the main point, which is actual grapes. From time to time, we might come across a dish where the leaves are used to wrap and maybe steam some other kind of food (I've had some stuff in grape leaves, and I thought it was disgusting). The trimmings are really not even good for firewood. Over the past 40+ years of my life, I have burned more grapevines than most of you can ever imagine, and I can tell you: Grape vines are not good firewood! It's almost like burning little sticks of paper. It's far more hassle than it's worth. I sometimes burn them just to get rid of them. But the main point of growing grapes is grapes! Not the leaves, not the branches, not the shade, but grapes. And the more grapes the better.

Even in this paragraph, we have something of a progression - from not bearing fruit, to some fruit, to more fruit (all in verse 2), and eventually to ***"much fruit"*** (in verse 8). But again, this is not really about grapes, is it? Jesus is teaching a spiritual lesson, and the lesson is: He wants us (as his disciples) to bear spiritual fruit. He wants us to be productive. Well, the obvious question is: What fruit do we bear? A number of suggestions have been made, but I keep coming back to the Fruit of the Spirit, as described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*** So we actually have a passage in the Bible straight up explaining to us the kind of fruit we bear. The goal of living the Christian life, then, the goal of discipleship, is to live out love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Or, as we often say here: Our goal is to "be Jesus." Our goal is to live like he lived, to think like he thought, to treat others just as he treated others. So, just as the goal of planting a grape vine is to get grapes, the goal of living as disciples of Jesus is to live like Jesus, to be Jesus.

Of course, at this point, seeing our goal and seeing how far we have to go, we might be tempted to feel like we are 10 miles out from Fargo, North Dakota, hungry, in the dark, needing a break, not knowing whether we have what it takes to get there. Living like Jesus seems a bit overwhelming sometimes. But before the panic sets in, before we get discouraged, let's back up...

- II. ...and let's notice what we are actually told to do in this passage - and it goes back to the picture of a grape. Does the branch panic? Does the branch just need to try harder? Does the branch suffer with intense anxiety over whether it can bear fruit? I've gone back to this passage over and over again this week, and it seems to me that the branch's role in this is simply to **ABIDE IN THE VINE**.

Spiritually speaking, then, our primary mission as disciples is to stay connected to Jesus. He is the vine, and we are the branches. If we maintain that connection, we will do what branches do. We will bear fruit - not because we are so awesome, not because we try harder today than we did yesterday, but rather, because we are doing what he created us to do, we are doing what we were designed to do. We bear fruit. We bear fruit by staying connected to the vine.

A few days ago, I went out to our backyard and cut a rather small branch off of one of our grape vines. Will that branch be bearing any fruit? No, it is disconnected from the vine. When that connection is broken, grapes are no longer in the picture. And so, it seems the Lord's main point here is that to bear fruit, we stay connected. We ***"abide"*** in him. We looked at this word a few weeks ago, and we learned then that it refers to being at home, a close and intimate relationship, living with somebody. We make ourselves at home with Jesus. We maintain the connection. And when we do, his power flows through us, and we bear fruit. We do what he intends us to do. We don't stress over it, but we do what comes naturally, ***"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*** This fruit is who we are as Jesus lives through us, as long as we ***"abide"*** in him. I think the word ***"abide"*** is found seven times in this passage. Abiding is what we are told to do here.

And so, instead of running away from home like the Prodigal Son did, we stay put. And unlike the branch up here, we need to stay connected, because our life comes from the vine. I'm thinking it's like having your phone plugged in. We lose that connection, and we start losing power. But if we stay connected, we bear fruit. And so, the command in this passage is to ***"abide."*** Bearing fruit isn't really the command here, but it's more of a passive response. I can order this branch up here to bear fruit, I can yell at it, and shame it, and threaten it, and try to motivate it in some way, but without being connected, bearing fruit just isn't going to happen. The connection is what we are looking for. We want to ***"abide"*** in him. By the way, just a few hours after this, almost all of the disciples would fail to abide! They are all about to run away. But the point is: Abiding is a choice. If it weren't a choice, Jesus wouldn't have to tell us to do it.

So, if there's no fruit-bearing going on in our lives, or if there's only a little bit of fruit, if we're tired, if we are low on resources, if we are running on fumes, we need to start by reestablishing the connection. And we do that by allowing his word to take hold in our hearts. As Paul writes in Romans 10:17, ***"...faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."*** Spiritual life and faith come through the word. We allow his word to shape us. As we sang just a bit ago, "Ancient words ever true. Changing me, and changing you. We have come with open hearts. Oh let the ancient words impart." We want his words to impart spiritual life. We want his words to fill us (through reading, by listening, and also through singing).

- I. And that leads us to what comes next as we come to God's role in all of this - God's role is to **PRUNE**.

Notice (in verse 3), Jesus says to his disciples, ***"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you."*** When pruning grapes, a vine that's been pruned is referred to as being ***"clean."*** In Ephesians 5:26-27, with reference to the church, Paul refers to Jesus, ***"...having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any***

***such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.***” James compares the word to a mirror. We see what needs to be done, and then we allow the word to cut, and to shape, and to prune. But God is the gardener in this picture. God is the ***“vinedresser.”*** God is the one with the pruning shears.

As I did some reading on grapes this week, one author suggested that over time a vinedresser will come to know each and every vine and that certain vines will have different personalities. And I laughed out loud, because I know this to be true! We had grapes at our home in Janesville, and I’ve had three vines here in Madison, and they are different. They do seem to have personalities! I’ve invested a lot time into each one, they behave differently. I honestly feel bad when they aren’t productive - like I need to do something, as if I have failed in some way.

The big pruning is done in the dead of winter, and you start by cutting off anything you know to be dead or damaged. Then you prune for structure. I have pruned mine to a double-T, with the main trunk being about as tall as I am, with two branches going out at the top, and two branches going out around waist level. And once you get that structure, you cut it back to that shape every year. And that structure gets strong. Right now, I have some about the size of my arm. So, pruning to the double-T happens every winter. In the spring, the new growth explodes from there (heading out roughly 20 feet in each direction), and it’s my job to direct those vines out and away from the trunk and to keep them up off the ground. And then, during the growing season, I might also take away even some of the healthy vines, so that more energy goes to the vines with the most clusters. At first, it almost hurts to do this, to cut off seemingly healthy growth, but it is for the good of the crop. Remember: The goal is fruit! We don’t care about a yard full of healthy leaves. The space in our garden is limited, and we don’t eat the leaves! I can’t afford to keep a plant that isn’t producing. So, whack the dead; trim the living!

And that process I’ve just described is pretty much what Jesus describes here. In verse 2, the vinedresser cuts off the branches that aren’t producing, and then he prunes those that are bearing fruit, so that they bear more fruit. Whack the dead; trim the living! This is God’s role as the vinedresser. Even today, we are pruned and trimmed, by the word of God. His word removes sin from our lives and keeps us headed in the right direction. His word, as we allow it, makes us more productive. His word removes the dead and trims the living. This is all for our benefit. We might not always appreciate it, but his word makes us more effective. His word comes in and cuts away whatever is holding us back. We think about our scripture reading this morning, where we learned that, ***“...the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”*** (Hebrews 4:12). We submit to his pruning when we listen to and when we obey the word of God. We cut out the deeds of the flesh, and we focus on the fruit of the spirit. His word whacks the dead and trims the living.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close, we need to ask ourselves whether we are as connected to the vine as we should be? Are we in Him? Is He in us? How is that connection? And then, are we bearing fruit? How are we doing with the ***“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”***? This is the fruit. This is the goal. This is what Christian living is all about. If we are not bearing fruit, or if we have potential to bear more fruit than we are, we need to know that God the Father uses his word to cut and to prune - not to hurt us, but to bring out our full potential. We glorify God by the fruit that we bear. As Jesus explains in verse 8, ***“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”*** Our fruit makes the gardener look good! And this brings us back to discipleship. Our fruit proves that we are his disciples.

Every time we love sacrificially, every time we experience joy, every time we are patient, every time we are kind, every time we are good, every time we are faithful, every time we are gentle, and every time we demonstrate self-control, we prove who we say we are; we prove that we are truly disciples of Jesus Christ.

I hope you are not discouraged this morning. I hope you're not feeling like the tank is almost empty. I hope you are not approaching Fargo in the dark, ten miles out, wondering whether you can make it. But if that is the case, I hope this passage has been encouraging in some way. God is the gardener, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. We stay connected to him through the word, and that word corrects us and points us in the right direction. We need the reminder.

This morning, if you realize that you have drifted away from the vine, we want to encourage you to come back, to reestablish that connection. We'd be happy to pray about that together as a family. But if you are not yet a part of God's family, we would also invite you to make that decision. The work has already been done. Jesus came to this earth and lived a perfect life. He offered himself on the cross for our sins, he died, he was buried, and he came back from the dead on the first day of the week. And now, on this first day of the week, we invite you to make the decision to become a disciple.

***"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth," Jesus says, "Go therefore and MAKE DISCIPLES of all the nations, BAPTIZING THEM in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, TEACHING THEM to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*** If we can help in some way with your obedience to the gospel, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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