

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/9/94
John 15:1-4 "How to be a Fruitful Christian"

Intro: Are you a fruitful Christian? (hold up a bunch of grapes)
One of the great images in the Bible used to depict the Christian life is Fruit.

Prov 11:30 "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life..."

Mt 7:20 "Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them."

In the parable of the 4 soils...

Mt 13:23 "But he that received seed in the good ground is he that hears the Word, and understands it, who also bears fruit..."

Gal 5:22 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..."

Rom 7:4 "...we should bring forth fruit unto God."

But how do you bring forth fruit? What does it take to be a fruitful Christian?
The Lord Jesus addresses that very issue in Jn 15--read vv 1-8.

Proposition: This morning, as we investigate John 15:1-4, we're going to learn that fruitfulness requires 2 activities.

The Setting: The importance of the Vineyard...

--In Jesus' day

--In the Old Testament

I. Fruitfulness requires Pruning (1-3).

A. Pruning is the Responsibility of the Father (1).

B. Pruning involves Radical Surgery (2).

C. Pruning requires a Relationship with Jesus (3).

II. Fruitfulness requires Abiding (4).

Practical Steps to Abiding in Christ:

1. Get to know Christ.

2. Make your relationship with Christ your #1 priority.

3. Determine that you will obey Christ in your life.

The setting is the Upper Room Discourse. Jesus and His disciples had just eaten the Passover Meal. It was a highly symbolic meal. On the table before them, there had been 3 significant items, each revealing something special about Jesus: the Lamb, the Bread, and the Fruit of the Vine.

The lamb--John the Baptist had announced that Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The bread--Christ had already announced, "I am the Bread of Life." (Jn 6:65) And there was the Fruit--notice 15:1...

V 1 "I am the true vine."

Why did He say that? To us, a vine is not very pretty. In fact, vines are kind of a nuisance. You have to whack them off the side of the house, and keep them from taking over the sidewalk.

Obviously, that's not the type of vine Jesus had in mind. Notice WHEN Jesus said this (14:31 "Arise, let us go"). Jesus and the 11 apparently left the upper room. Although scholars debate this, it seems that while the words of Jn 13-14 were given in the upper room, the content of ch 15-17 was given after they left, on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. They went down the steps, through the winding streets of Jerusalem, out through the gate, down the slope, across the brook Kidron, and up the Mount of Olives. According to 18:1, they don't cross Kidron until after Jesus' prayer in ch 17. Possibly, as the group traveled through the darkness, Jesus saw a vineyard, a grape vineyard.

Vines were plentiful in the agricultural nation of Israel. To develop a vineyard, a person would first clear the rocks out of the field, and use the rocks to build a protective wall to keep out thieves. Then he would terrace the ground, and possibly build a watchtower in the middle of the vineyard.

Vineyards took lots of work. The vines needed constant care. Every year, the gardener would have to chop back the excess foliage, and stake up the plant to keep the fruit off the ground.

Perhaps Jesus saw such a vine. And He said, v 1--"I am the true vine."

What did the image of the vine mean to Jesus and His 11?

We have to go to the OT to answer that question. In fact, we must raise another question. In the OT, who does the vine represent? Let's look...

Ps 80:8 "Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt."

Who was that? Israel. What happened to the vine, Israel?

Isa 5:1-7 "Now I will sing to my well-beloved a song touching his vineyard..."

Let me ask you, "What does a Gardener expect out of his vine?" A bunch of beautiful branches? No. He wants fruit.

What did God expect out of Israel? Fruit. What kind of fruit? Isa 5:7 "He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry." God designed His people to exhibit the fruit of justice and righteousness in their lives. But they failed. For 14 centuries, they failed. Israel was a degenerate vine.

Then along came Jesus. And what did He say?

V 1 "I am the TRUE vine."

The TRUE vine. Jesus fulfilled what God intended for Israel. Israel failed. He did not. He lived a perfect life. He exhibited justice and righteousness.

Listen. What Jesus is saying struck a sensitive note for Jews. He is saying to them, "If you think that because you are an Israelite, you are a branch in God's vine, you're wrong. I am the True vine. It's not Jewish blood that connects you to God's vine. It's a relationship with Me."

Now that we understand the background, what the vineyard meant in Jesus' day, as well as in the OT, we can talk about fruitfulness. God's goal for His people is fruitfulness. What is mandatory for fruitfulness? Two requirements...

I. Fruitfulness involves Pruning (1-3).

Illust: I learned a lot about pruning when I was in H.S. I worked for my uncle who had a wholesale nursery. There were hundreds of trees and shrubs in the 30 acre field. I learned that maturity does not just happen for plants. The growth process takes sunshine, water, good soil, the right temperature. And something else...

Fruitfulness requires pruning. I remember how cruel it seemed at first. My uncle handed me the knife, and showed me the trees--the maples, the oaks, the mountain ash, the crimson king. He told me it was my job to prune them. That meant I had to cut away the sucker growth from around the trunk of the trees. The sucker shoots would sap the nourishment needed for the tree to be healthy and strong. It was a radical process, but necessary. I learned 3 important lessons about pruning from that experience:

1. Pruning is the responsibility of the Gardener.
2. Pruning involves radical surgery.
3. The goal of pruning is fruitfulness.

The Lord tells us the same 3 things are involved in spiritual pruning.

A. Pruning is the Responsibility of the Father (1).

V 1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."

My Father is the vinedresser ("husbandman" KJV). It's a general agricultural term which refers to one who tills the soil--a "farmer" or "gardener." Vines require care. And Jesus says that His Father provides that care.

Pruning is the responsibility of our Heavenly Father. He prunes the branches. Why? Because it is His Vine. He is actively involved in the lives of followers of Christ.

Illust:

What's involved in our Father's pruning process?

B. Pruning involves Radical Surgery (2).

V 2 "Every branch in Me..."

A Palestinian vinedresser prunes his vine every year. He prunes the branches in two ways (Wiersbe). First, he cuts away dead wood that can breed disease and insects. And second, he cuts away living growth that is undesirable--excess branches, and even whole bunches of grapes at times. Why such drastic action? To improve the productivity of the vine.

It's a fact. The pruning process involves radical surgery. Cutting and clipping and removing are drastic and decisive. Branches that don't bear fruit are cut off, and used for firewood.

Quote: Wiersbe (356) "This pruning process is the most important part of the whole enterprise, and the people who do it must be carefully trained or they can destroy an entire crop. Some vineyards invest two or three years in training the 'pruners' so they know where to cut, how much to cut, and even what angle to cut."

Jesus is the True vine. Who does the "branch" represent? You say, "Well, Jesus said, 'Every branch IN ME,' so branches are Christians, right?" Not necessarily. "In Me" is not the same as Paul's "in Christ." Here it's part of the vine metaphor. It means, "Every person who professes to be my follower is not necessarily a true disciple. A branch that bears no fruit is obviously dead. And like Judas, he is cut off."

Notice the progression: fruit (2a), more fruit (2b), much fruit (5). The goal of the Gardener is much fruit. Is that significant? Yes! It means we never arrive as Christians. We're constantly changing. We're either becoming more fruitful or less. And listen. A bumper crop 5 years ago means little to the Gardener this year!

Illust: Suppose an apple tree could talk. And it said to the Gardener, "I gave you 20 bushels of apples 5 years ago. Remember how happy you were. I think that's enough. I don't want to produce any more. I just want to take it easy and let my branches grow." What would the Gardener do? He'd wack off some branches!

That's why our Father uses the radical surgery of pruning on us. We need it.

Listen. The worst thing God could do for a believer would be to let him alone, and let him have his own way (Wiersbe). But friend, because God loves us, He prunes us. Sometimes He cuts away dead wood from our lives. Sometimes He lops off living growth--that is, He takes away good things so we might enjoy the best. Yes, pruning is radical surgery. It hurts. But it also helps. We need it. The goal is fruit.

Examples:

--A severe one is Ananias and Sapphira. They lied. So God pruned them right on the spot. He took their lives, so the church's fruitfulness would not be choked.

--The Christians at Corinth were another. They formed cliques. So God pruned them. Some became sick. Some even died.

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C. Pruning requires a Relationship with Jesus (3).

V 3 "Now are ye clean..."

The word "clean" (3) and "purgeth" (2) are closely related in the greek. Literally, v 3 reads, "Now you clean are." Jesus told His disciples they were pruned, they were clean.

What made the disciples clean? "the word which I have spoken to you"

Remember again the vine image. You don't walk up to a grapevine and say, "Wow, look at those beautiful branches!" A branch doesn't call attention to itself. The goal is fruit. That's why every year the gardener prunes the branches. He cuts them way back to the main stock of the vine. If he didn't, the plant would produce wood, but little fruit (and the wood was good only for burning, v 6).

Here's what Jesus was saying to the 11, "Listen men. After 3 years with Me, you're clean. My word has pruned you. My word has admonished you when needed. My word has cut out the undesirable traits in your lives. Now I'm leavning. But you are ready to produce fruit."

How does that apply to us? Pruning requires a relationship with Jesus. It's Jesus' word that makes us clean. It's Jesus' word that prepares us for fruitbearing.

Q: Let me ask you, "What place does the Word of Christ have in your life?"

How often do you read the Bible? What do you do when you run across a portion of God's Word that contradicts your lifestyle? Do you excuse it by saying, "Well, that's just a matter of interpretation!"?

As your pastor, let me speak frankly. I agree with an observation I read by D.A. Carson (100), "No one is more miserable than the Christian who hedges in obedience. He doesn't love sin enough to enjoy its pleasures, and he doesn't love Christ enough to relish holiness."

Illust:

Tran: How can you be a fruitful Christian? Jesus said, first of all, there must be pruning. You may be thinking, "But that's the Father's responsibility. Do I have to do anything to be fruitful?"

II. Fruitfulness involves Abiding (4).

When it comes to fruitfulness, God takes care of the pruning. Our part is the abiding. What does it mean to abide in Christ? We'll explore this in greater detail next week. But for now, look at v 4.

V 4 "Abide in Me..."

Q: What is fruit?

Simply put, fruit is the product of the plant. It's the reproduction of that plant. A peach tree produces peaches. A grape vine grapes. An apple tree apples.

What fruit do Christians produce? Christlikeness.

What is fruit for the Christian? Does fruit refer to evangelism, the result of leading others to Christ? Yes, in part (Col 1:6). Does fruit refer to Christian character? Yes, in part (Gal 5:22). What is fruit? Look at v 8--"In this is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit."

Fruit is everything that brings glory to the Father. Fruit is everything we do that conforms to the will of Christ. Fruit is allowing Christ to live through me.

Think about something. Bill Hull has written, "Too many think that once you become a Christian you turn on the spiritual autopilot. Christian growth is supernatural, not automatic (61)." He's right.

Fruitfulness does not just happen. The Father's part is the Pruning. What's our responsibility? The abiding. V 4 "Abide in Me..."

What does it mean to abide in Christ? It's a key word in John's gospel. It appears 11 times in this chapter, and 40 times in the entire book. It can be translated "remain, dwell, lodge, stay." By definition, it has to do with an inward, enduring, personal communion.

But what really does it mean to abide in Christ? How can we tell if we're abiding in Him? Do we get a special warm feeling in our heart? Not necessarily. We'll explore that question in greater detail next week, as we look at vv 4-8.

For now, let's say this. To abide in Christ is to have fellowship with Christ, to be close to Christ, to be in constant contact with Christ. When I am abiding in Christ, I am allowing His life to be reproduced in me.

Challenge: If we don't abide in Christ, there will be no lasting fruit. Abiding is a condition for fruitfulness. If we want to be fruitful we need to learn to abide in Him.

Q: "What must I do in order to abide in Christ?"

Practical Steps to Abiding in Christ:

I want to be practical at this point. I confess that there's much I do not understand about what it means to abide in Christ. But this I do know. There are 3 practical steps which are indispensable to abiding. If I am to abide in Christ, I must...

1. Get to know Christ.

Christianity is not just another religion. It's not just a way of life. It's a relationship between us and a personal God. If I am going to see the fruit of Christ in my life, then I must abide in Him. And if I am going to abide in Him, I must get to know Him.

Do you know Christ? Are you getting to know Him better every day?

2. Make your relationship with Christ your #1 priority.

What is your #1 ambition in life? To make money? To have a good time? To be popular? To be successful?

Listen. Those who are abiding in Christ are people who have learned to make their relationship with Christ their #1 priority in life. Being close to Him is more important than anything else. That's why they spend time in His Word daily. That's why they pray. That's why they don't miss the church worship services.

3. Determine that you will obey Christ in your life.

Again, v 3 says, "Now are you clean through the Word which I have spoken." When we abide in Christ, we determine that we are going to obey Him in every area of our lives.

Listen. When I abide in Christ, it makes me a better husband and father. When I abide in Christ, it affects my performance on the job and in school. Why? Because I want my life to please Him. I want my life to follow in His steps.

Illust:

Q: What does it take to be a fruitful Christian? It requires pruning--that's our Heavenly Father's part. It requires abiding--that's our responsibility.