

Thanks to Bruce and Gordon for leading worship last Sunday and giving Judy and me a chance to take a few days off. For over twenty-five years, our family has rented a cabin on Lake Jocassee in the Blue Ridge mountains of South Carolina. We have had some great and memorable times there with our children and grandchildren. It also gave us an opportunity to visit with our relatives. In addition, it gave me some time to relax and read some books that I normally don't get a chance to read during the rest of the year as I prepare weekly sermons and Bible studies.

On all of our trips back to South Carolina, I always go and check on our tree farm where we grow pine trees for pulpwood and lumber. This trip was special since my son Ben and his family were able to spend time on the farm; this is the first time that my grandsons have ever been to the farm that has been in our family for over a hundred years. I usually spend a few hours walking or riding through the woods checking the growth of the trees and looking for any signs of pine beetles. Now I don't know if you have ever been in the forests back east, but there's a lot of undergrowth, so as you are walking you have to dodge the limbs, bushes, and vines. The vines reminded me of a book that I read several years ago during one of our trips back home. The *Secret of the Vine* by Bruce Wilkerson is based on Jesus' teachings in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John; let's look at the first eight verses this morning.

Read John 15:1-8

In the preceding chapters, the Apostle John discusses the events of the Lord's Supper. Jesus has just told His disciples that He must leave them and return to His Father. Following the meal, eleven dejected men follow Jesus down the stairs of the Upper Room and out into the cool of the night. Some of the disciples carry lamps or burning torches to light the way. They follow Jesus down the hill, through the winding streets of Jerusalem, and out of the city into the valley where they pass through the ancient vineyards.

Here Jesus stops, takes some grapes in His hands, and begins discussing the branches and grapes, and how the owner of the vineyard cares for his prized possession. Now this is not a normal horticulture lesson; within these verses Jesus reveals the secret of an abundant life – a life lived to the fullest; a life of true satisfaction and happiness. Jesus loved to convey the deepest truths of life through simple down-to-earth examples. Using this metaphor of the vineyard, Jesus describes our role in God's kingdom; a role of bearing fruit for the Lord.

Jesus tells them: "I am the vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in Him, bears much fruit. By this My Father is glorified, that you may bear much fruit."

Now the task of the keeper of the vineyard is simple, to coax the most grapes possible from his plants. A healthy and properly maintained vineyard means a higher yield. In this story, God is the Keeper of the vineyard. If you haven't figured it out by now, you and I are the branches. In the vineyard, the branches are the focus of the gardener's attention because they are the ones that produce the fruit. Branches are tied to a trellis or propped up with sticks to let the air circulate, to provide maximum amount of sunshine, and to allow full access for proper care. The gardener carefully cultivates each branch so that it will bear as much fruit as possible.

Now as you read this passage, you may initially think that by telling us to bear fruit, Jesus is calling Christians to bring others to know Him. And you would be correct; in the Great Commission Jesus told us to go make disciples; to bear fruit for Him. But in the Gospel of John, there are usually two meanings to a story or saying; there is the apparent surface meaning and then there is a deeper meaning. In this passage Jesus is discussing two types of fruits. First, we produce an inner fruit as we grow spiritually and become more like Jesus. Remember the Christ-like qualities that the Apostle Paul described in Galatians 5:22: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." As Christians, we are expected to produce this fruit in our daily lives.

In addition, we are also called to produce outward fruit when we allow God to work through us to bring Him glory. This definitely includes sharing our faith with others. Whether you're visiting someone who is homebound or in the hospital, feeding the homeless, working at St. Joseph and Gallup, working in the Pantry, leading worship at MorningStar and Palmilla or spending a lifetime as a missionary in a faraway country, outward fruit appears when your motive is to bring God glory.

So, how important and valuable is fruit bearing? Later on, in this chapter in verse 16 Jesus says: "I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit – fruit that will last, that will not spoil." Real fruit produced for God always lasts! And it is for this purpose that we were created and saved. The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Ephesians 2:10 that they were "created in Christ Jesus for good works." In our passage this morning, Jesus identifies four distinct levels of bearing fruit. In a sense, there are four different baskets of grapes in this passage that Jesus describes for us. If you pick up the first basket and look inside, you don't see any fruit; it's empty. That's not good; some branches don't produce a single grape. Jesus had this particular branch in mind when He said in verse 2: "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit will be cut off."

As we look into the second basket, we see several healthy clusters of grapes nestled in the bottom. Some branches are not totally barren; you can find a few grapes on them. Jesus described this branch as one that "bears fruit." But is this what Jesus wants or had in mind for those who follow Him; to occasionally produce some fruit?

The third basket is more encouraging; you see a basket more than half full of plump, juicy grapes. This is more like it! This branch is described as “bearing **more** fruit.”

So, what’s the fourth level? What’s in the fourth basket? The fourth basket overflows with the biggest, most desirable grapes that you have ever seen. You couldn’t believe that a single branch could produce that many grapes. Jesus’ description of this branch is that it “bears **much** fruit.”

Do you see what Jesus is saying here? Each of us is a branch in the Father’s vineyard and we are each called to bear fruit. And our production and faithfulness to the Lord is illustrated by one of these four baskets: Basket 1 – no fruit; Basket 2 – some fruit; Basket 3 – more fruit; and Basket 4 – lots of fruit.

It is God’s desire that we each will produce as much fruit possible. Thus, in a way He is acting like a gardener in that He keeps cultivating us in an attempt to move us from a barren branch to a productive branch from an empty basket to one that is overflowing. And believe it or not, more is always possible, because we were created to bear fruit, more fruit, and still more fruit. Our question this morning is how much fruit are you producing in your life? Which basket best describes your walk with the Lord?

Jesus indicates that “every branch in me that does not bear fruit God cuts off.” Now that’s a troubling thought! Some biblical scholars have interpreted this to mean that if you don’t bear any fruit, you can’t be a Christian. Others have indicated that “cut off” means that if you live without showing any evidence of your salvation, you lose it. But is this what Jesus really meant? Doesn’t the phrase “every branch in me” provide another interpretation? In the New Testament believers are repeatedly described as being “in Christ.” Therefore, a more reasonable interpretation is that it is possible to be “in Christ,” while not producing any fruit for a while. Experience bears this out. If you’re like me, you’ve gone a week, a month or even longer living in such a way that you know you didn’t bear any fruit for the Lord. I believe that is what Jesus is talking about here.

One of the reasons that some branches bear no fruit is that new branches have a natural tendency to grow along the ground. As a result, the leaves get coated with dirt and when it rains, they get muddy and mildewed. Thus, the branch becomes sick and useless, and doesn’t produce any grapes. So, what does the gardener do? Does he cut off the branch and throw it into the fire? No, the branch is far too valuable for that. The gardener goes through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for dirty branches. He lifts the branch up and washes it. Then he wraps the branch around the trellis or ties it up. Pretty soon the branch is thriving.

Do you see how this relates to us? Lift up and clean; that what God’s grace does for us. Sin is like the dirt covering the leaves; air and light can’t get in. If your life is not bearing fruit, you

need to ask God to come and wash away the dirt and let the light of Jesus Christ come in. As King David said in Psalm 51: “Wash away all my inquiry and cleanse me from my sin.” Through His grace, God washes us clean and gives us new life.

After Jesus told His disciples how the gardener cares for the barren branches, He reached for a branch that showed rampant growth but produced only a few clusters of grapes. Left to itself, a branch will always favor new growth over more grapes. Listen again to Jesus’ words: “Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” Now God’s strategy for coaxing a greater harvest out of His branches is not the one that you and I would prefer. His plan is to prune, which means to thin, to reduce, to trim. If necessary, God will risk our misunderstanding of His methods and motives. His goal is to cut away those unproductive commitments and priorities in our life to make room for more productive activities. Think about what’s happening in your life right now; do you feel God’s shears pruning your life? Some of you may even feel like God has brought out the big hedge clippers. Without pruning, we are only able to live up to a fraction of the potential that we were created for.

In order for us to produce the fruit God expects from us, God must first cut away the parts of our lives that drain precious time and energy from what’s really important. In pruning, God asks us to let go of those things that keep us from being productive and living as He intended. Pruning is how God changes the picture of our life from a basket that is almost empty to a basket that’s starting to fill up. Where does God need to start pruning in your life and the church?

One of the joys and advantages of researching and preparing for a sermon is gaining new insights. The eye opener in this passage for me was that the gardener prunes the branches more intensely as they grow older. Now that’s not what I want to hear at my age; I was hoping that it was the other way around. But a horticulturist said that the branch’s ability to produce growth increases each year; however, without intensive pruning the plant weakens and its crop diminishes. Mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yield.

While the early pruning is mostly about our outward activities and priorities, mature pruning is more about our values and personal identity. The biblical term for this is “the testing of your faith.” In mature pruning, the pruning will intensify as God’s shears cut closer to the core of who you are. His goal is to bring us closer to Him and to help us become more like His Son Jesus Christ in our thoughts, words and actions.

With all this said, what’s the secret to filling the fourth basket to overflowing with fruit? Is it by working harder and longer hours? That’s where a lot of us get it wrong. No, the secret lies in verse 4: “Remain in me, abide in me, and you will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing.” God does not want us to **do** more for Him; He wants us to **be** more **with** Him. Did

you hear that – “to be more with Him.” Note the key word “**with** Him.” And we will do this if we focus on Him and spend more time with Him in worship and quiet time.

Do you remember the source of growth in a tree or vine? It’s the sap that runs through it, mysteriously out of sight. In abiding and remaining, what happens on the surface doesn’t count as much as what’s happening inside. Abiding is spending time alone with the Lord and focusing on His constant presence and His will for our life. The only limitation to the amount of sap that goes to the fruit is the thickness of the branch. This means that the branch that is the closest to the trunk or the source of strength will produce the best crop. The same is true for us; the closer we are to the Lord, the more fruit we produce for Him.

So, the question for each one of us this morning is – are we bearing any fruit for the Lord? Which of the four baskets represents our life? Are we producing fruit that lasts? If you really want to live life to the fullest and make a difference, then heed the words of Jesus. Give Him your life and abide in Him. Amen