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## **STORIES FROM THE VINEYARD**

### **Part 3 – Pruning**

(from Bruce Wilkinson's book, Secrets of the Vine)

On Jesus' last night on earth, He explained to His disciples that the purpose of our lives is to bear fruit for God.....and He used the analogy of a grapevine (*Jesus is the vine*), a vinedresser (*The Father is the vinedresser*), and a harvest of grapes (*You and I are branches*). This teaching is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 15. Since it is the desire of the Father that every one of His branches bears much fruit, He personally oversees each life in two ways: (1) through discipline or chastisement, which was the subject of last month's teaching: *My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.* (2) through pruning.

#### **Number Two: Pruning**

(Bruce Wilkinson's teaching follows:) One spring my wife and I moved to the country so that we could slow down. A couple of days after we unpacked, I was puttering in my garage when I noticed my neighbor hacking down a row of grapevines that rambled along a fence on our shared property line. I was very concerned, so I walked over to say hi. My neighbor, a large, white-haired man in overalls, was wielding a big set of shears and all around him lay heaps of grape branches. I introduced myself and in a delicate way asked him why he was destroying our grape vines.

He said, "You don't know anything about grapes, do you?" As I started to respond, he continued, "Well, son, we can either grow ourselves a lot of beautiful leaves filling up this whole fence line. Or we can have the biggest, sweetest grapes you have ever seen. We just can't have both."

SECOND SECRET OF THE VINE: *If your life bears some fruit, God will intervene to prune you.*

A gardening book explains about growing grapes: "Because of the grape's tendency to grow so vigorously, a lot of wood must be cut away each year. Grapevines can become so dense that the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form." A vineyard's only purpose is...grapes. So pruning is a grower's single most important technique for ensuring a plentiful harvest.

For the Christian, rampant growth represents all those preoccupations and priorities in our lives that, while not wrong or sinful, are keeping us from significant ministry for God. Without pruning, growing Christians will only be able to live up to a fraction of their potential.

An important question: Are you praying for more blessings, for more fruitfulness in your service for God, for more Christlikeness, for more power and effectiveness in your ministry? Be careful how you pray, because pruning is how God answers your prayers that your life will please Him more and have a greater impact for eternity.

To make room for the kind of abundance God created us for, He must first cut away parts of our lives that drain time and energy from what is truly important. This cutting away is painful! (Think about circumcision in the Old Testament.) And God's pruning is not random but uniquely designed for each life. Over the years, I have asked many Christians to describe what pruning has looked like in their lives. Here are some of the things I have heard:

- Kyle, airline employee - - “After I became a Christian, I noticed that my monthly night out with my old crowd from high school began to leave me feeling empty and out of place. So I quit going. A few months later, I led one of the guys to the Lord.” Through Kyle’s dissatisfaction, God was showing him that an old activity was dead or dying. It took up time and energy but produced no fruit for God. When Kyle let go of it, new results showed in its place.
- LaShauna, mother of four - - “God has been nudging me to let go of some selfish habits that have been hindering my marriage for a long time. I had a real struggle in obeying God. I started meeting weekly with an older woman in our church, and with her encouragement I did what I felt God was telling me. I’m experiencing new freedom and am very thankful. So is my husband!” LaShauna’s self-oriented behaviors were choking out her ability to bear fruit in her marriage. God wanted to *prune out the leaves* and *allow more sun* to reach her key relationship.
- Jared, college senior - - “I had to decide which was more important, the perfect two-hour workout or dedicating more time to our growing campus ministry.” God was inviting Jared to set aside more time to *increase the size and quality of the fruit* in his life.
- Howard, retired programmer - - “I thought I would spend my retirement playing golf and traveling, but God has been showing me some golden opportunities in short-term mission service. I think it’s time to do something for God, something really outside my comfort zone.” God is looking for *new fruit* from Howard.

### **Misunderstanding God’s Methods**

IF DISCIPLINE IS ABOUT SIN, PRUNING IS ABOUT SELF. In pruning, God asks you to let go of things that keep you from His kingdom purposes and your ultimate good. Let’s be honest, pruning is cutting and cutting hurts. (Again, think about circumcision, which was designed and commanded by God.) The pain of pruning sounds a lot like being disciplined, doesn’t it? No wonder most Christians have trouble distinguishing between discipline and pruning in their lives. It all feels the same, but it isn’t.

Remember: Discipline is because we are doing something wrong - - - sin.

Pruning is because we are doing something right - - - - self.

Jesus wanted His disciples to be clear about the difference. Why? *Because the purposes of discipline and pruning are entirely different, and because the consequences of confusing them can be disastrous!* I know. For years I struggled with anger and confusion because I mistook the process of pruning for discipline. When intense periods of distress seemed to lay siege to me, my family, or my ministry, I turned things upside down looking for the kind of major sin that would warrant the pain I was experiencing. I asked my wife to help me see what I was missing. I pleaded, “What else do you want from me, Lord?” I confessed every known sin and waited for relief. But when nothing changed, I frequently slipped into anger toward God, then into bitterness, then mistrust. The result was a break in my relationship with Him.

And here’s the irony: Over time, those wrong reactions to pruning became a freeway that took me out of pruning and back into God’s discipline. What a vicious cycle! If I hadn’t finally grasped the difference, I could have been at odds with God for the rest of my life. But listen – vast numbers of Christians I talk to are stuck in the same misunderstanding, repeating the same cycle, and getting the same painful results. I believe that misreading God’s actions or motives in pruning is the number one reason mature Christians slide back into discipline. Does this scenario describe your life?

### **PRUNING VERSUS DISCIPLINE - - WHICH IS IT?**

You can distinguish pruning from discipline by asking a few simple questions:

1. Acknowledge that God is trying to get your attention.
2. Trust that since a loving parent would tell a child why he or she is receiving correction, your loving Father will do no less. He wants you to know the reason for the suffering you are experiencing.
3. Ask the Lord to answer this question: *Do I have a major sin that is causing You to discipline me?*
4. Pray, *Lord, if You do not show me within a week from today that it is discipline, then I will take it by faith that it is pruning.* From my own experience, I can assure you that God has many ways to let you know if sin is the issue – you will find the truth in a Scripture, a conversation, a teaching, or a phone call from a friend.
5. If you conclude that you are being disciplined, sin is the problem. Repent and turn around. You will never regret it.

6. If you conclude that you are being pruned, your response is just as crucial, and the rewards will be even greater. Ask God to how you clearly what He wants you to let go of, and release it completely to Him.

#### WHEN DOES THE PAIN AND SUFFERING STOP?

For disciplining/chastening for sin: It stops when we stop sinning.

For pruning for self (crucifying the soulish nature): It stops when God is finished.

Imagine a sunny day in Indiana. Darren, 25, has driven up from Memphis to see his dad, whom he's hardly spoken to for years. They're out in the driveway shooting a few hoops. Finally Darren gets out what he has driven so far to say: "Dad, I didn't understand you for years. I didn't know why you had so many rules for me in high school – about parties, TV, chores, driving, money. I didn't like your expectations. I thought you were mean and stupid. I said terrible things about you behind your back, and I even hated you at times. But now I see that you were just trying to be a good dad. You only wanted what was best for me and you never gave up. Dad, I came here to apologize for what I thought and said about you. I was wrong. I know I hurt you very deeply, and I'm sorry."

I believe that the majority of believers need just such a conversation with their Father. It is amazing that God allows Himself to be hurt by us. We know this because Ephesians 4:30 says, *Do not grieve the Holy Spirit*. Yet His love remains constant! I encourage you to apologize today for your attitudes and thoughts, and ask Him for His forgiveness.

#### GIVING GOD PERMISSION

Darlene and I don't live in that house with the grape arbor anymore, but I've thought about my country awakening many times. I can still see that row of grapevines in September, its branches thick with clusters of purple fruit. I can still see the kitchen table groaning under boxes and baskets of grapes. I can smell the vats of jams and jellies bubbling on the stove. Abundance is such a beautiful thing, isn't it?

You might be looking down the fence line of your life right now, seeing branches being hacked off, feeling assaulted by circumstances, and wondering what is going on. I must tell you that your heavenly Father loves you so much that He won't stop tending your life. As you will see in the next chapter, accepting the pruning process doesn't mean that your life, or your enjoyment of it, will shrink. The most fruitful and the most joy-filled Christians are the most pruned Christians!

#### **Post-script from Glenn:**

Bruce Wilkinson's teaching helped me to see how clearly Jesus taught His disciples God's purpose for their lives and God's way of achieving this purpose. I am amazed by God's universal sovereignty and His loving involvement with every human on earth. Also, I can now better understand what God was trying to accomplish by the times of trial and suffering that I went through.

Looking at it in retrospect, it doesn't seem like that big a deal, and I never shed blood in the process (although a great number of people wanted to kill me, and at the time I would have been happy if they had done so and put me out of my misery). I went through a combined seven years of strife in two churches I pastored and twice lost my ministry position, career, and financial security. It did not need to be that long, but God had to deal with my entrenched stubbornness and sin, particularly my pride, lust, insecurity, and self-love.

I loved God, but I also loved my independence - my freedom to decide what was right and wrong for me, and freedom to spend my time and money however I wanted to. (Note the use of I, me, and my in that sentence.) An argument was going on in my head: "Maybe this whole God-thing is just a myth. I don't want to become a fanatic." I can remember deep and agonizing times of wrestling with temptation (actually, I think I was wrestling with God, like Jacob), as I tried to decide which direction to go. At the same time, I was going through much tribulation in my marriage, with the trials of our children, and at times with health and finances.

I can remember when I was a Methodist pastor and had undergone several years of civil war in the church. What hurt the most was the way some people were treating my wife and our children. Along with that was the hatred and contempt by the hierarchy of the church because of the change in my theology that came with my experience with the Holy Spirit. One morning I knelt by the couch and said, "Lord, this is too much for me. I can't take it any more." It was one of those times

when I heard God clearly. He said, “Glenn, I suffered for you. Aren’t you willing to suffer for me?” I thought about my answer for what seemed a long time and finally said, “Yes, Lord, I am willing to suffer for you.” I thought to myself, “Well, I passed that test, so now God will stop all the stuff that is going on.” But He didn’t. The stuff continued on interminably.

As I review my life, I can identify certain seasons when the Father was chastising me because of sin so that I would come to repentance, and other seasons when He was dealing with my self, my strong self-will and self-love by pruning me. I wish I had understood this process at the time, but I’m thankful that we can at this time internalize it so that we will be better prepared for tests in the future. Since we are not quite perfect (Ha!), more tests are surely coming.

Let me add to, or reiterate, Bruce’s list of some things that may need to be pruned from people’s lives. I realize that some of these things cross the line from self to sin and are in the realm of chastisement, but sometimes the distinction is not clear to me:

- **Lovers.** The Bible is clear about what kind of sexual relationship is approved by God and is designed for our ultimate good: a man and a woman united in the covenant of marriage. Many people refuse to hear God on this subject and cling to their lover in what the psychologists used to call a “hysterical” way. Heidi Baker was engaged to a godly man whom she loved deeply. Their relationship was pure. But God told her to break the engagement, that He had something else in mind for her. Because she obeyed, with many tears and deep anguish, He gave her Roland Baker, the nation of Mozambique, and a worldwide ministry.
- **Friends.** One of the most agonizing choices many new Christians have to make is between their old friends and God. The Bible speaks in many places about how crucial this decision is. Old friends and their worldly ways can be like an anchor that is pulling us down to hell. Also, married men need to beware of close friendships with other women. Emotional bonds can develop that are destructive to their marriage. Wives can sense, “Adultery!” even when the relationship is platonic. Our hearts are to be shared only with God and our spouse.
- **Music.** Worldly music can be like ungodly friendships. It is quite amazing how deeply in love some people are with corrupt music and entertainers. The Bible tells us that God is a “jealous” God. Just like a husband does not want to share his wife with another man, God does not want to share His bride with other lovers.
- **Money, career, success.** What a huge stumbling block this is to a committed Christian life. “Love of money,” not money itself, is the issue. And Jesus did not say, “You cannot love both God and money,” He said, “You cannot love both God and Mammon.” Mammon was the name of the Syrian god of money, and it represented an idol or a demon. Jesus was saying that when love of money captures a heart, it is idolatry and demonic.
- **Alcohol, drugs, nicotine, gambling.** Some legalistic churches list these things as forbidden sins, but the Bible is not so clear. I won’t take space for some of the Scriptures that address alcohol, which we can take as representative of the others. But I know how addictive and destructive these things can be - - from my own experience with alcohol as well as the experience of many others. Careers destroyed, health shattered, marriages broken, children wounded - common sense should cause us to be careful and prayerful about our use of these things.
- **Hobbies.** Hobbies are those things that we in our affluent nation have time and money to pursue, and they are neutral as far as good and evil are concerned. But since we fallen creatures have such a tendency toward addiction, we need to beware. Our fun and games can capture our hearts, things like: football, golf, fishing, horses, movies, television, electronic games, facebook, cooking, vacations, traveling, etc, etc.

If anything in the above list was like sticking a pin in your hide, maybe you need to have a conversation with the Lord. He loves you and has a wonderful/difficult plan for your life!

## **THE UNIVERSE IS BIG!**

- The distance from the earth to the sun is 93,000,000 miles. Imagine that distance is the thickness of a sheet of paper.
- The distance, end to end, of our solar system (sun and planets) would be a stack of paper (each piece of paper being 93 million miles) - - 310 miles high.

- The distance, end to end, of the known universe, would be a stack of paper (each piece of paper being 93 million miles) - - 31 million miles high.
  - And God “stretched it out like a curtain” (Isaiah 40:22).
  - He just popped it open like you would open an umbrella: Pop!
  - And you have a question about whether He knows what He is doing in your life?
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## **CUPCAKE MINISTRY**

James Robinson had a lady named Danielle Strickland on his show. Danielle is a 72-year old Baptist lady from Australia. She said that in Australia brothels are legal and are as common and accepted as 7-11 stores.

A few years ago Danielle had a very annoying problem. Her telephone number was two digits off from one of the brothels in her community, and she kept getting phone calls at all hours of the day and night.

She decided to have her number changed, but she got the impression that the Holy Spirit was saying no. She was very confused. She prayed for a number of days, and finally she heard God saying, “Take them cupcakes.”

She was shocked at the very idea. What would happen to her if she knocked on the door of one of those houses and told them she had brought cupcakes? What would the neighbors say if they heard about it?

She decided to obey what she thought she heard God saying. The girls wept and opened their hearts at this expression of compassion. Now there are 70 cupcake ministries in Australia.

God Bless  
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