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STORIES FROM THE VINEYARD

Part 1 – The Purpose of our Life

If someone asked you to explain the purpose of life, what would you say? A few years ago, Bruce Wilkinson wrote a little booklet titled “Secrets of the Vine” where he draws from the sacred Scriptures the answer to this question. The answer is so important and so encouraging to our lives that I want to use several of my monthly teachings to share these insights with you. Following is the introduction to his teaching, partly paraphrased:

Imagine you were with someone who is about to die, someone who loves you and wants to leave you with a crucially important final word. Now imagine that the person who is about to speak is Jesus. Would you pay close attention to His words, and would you always remember them? That is what happened, and we have the account of what He said in John 15 – the final night He would spend with His disciples. By sundown the following day, Jesus would be stretched out on a cross, His life ebbing away.

Jesus knew that the words He spoke that night would be deeply etched in the memory of His followers, and He knew they would be recorded in the holy Bible for mankind to consider and ponder until the end of time. The time for parables and hidden messages had passed. He wanted to be crystal clear because He was going to spell out for them and for us the very purpose of our lives.

The setting for this final teaching begins in an upper room on the night before the festival of Passover, the Jewish day to remember the nation’s escape from slavery in Egypt, which had happened about 1,500 years in the past. Thousands of Jews had pressed into Jerusalem to celebrate, for they knew that the prophets had predicted that on one of these festival days Messiah would arrive to deliver Israel from her oppressors. But these men knew something the crowds outside didn’t: Messiah is already here! They have been arguing on the journey from Galilee, and even in this room, about who would get the highest positions of honor in the new kingdom.

Jesus gently corrected their misunderstanding by several startling words and actions: *And Jesus....rose from supper, took a towel and girded Himself...poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet.* (John 13:2-5) *I assure you that one of you will betray me.....you will all deny me.....A little while longer and the world will see me no more.* Then He comforts them: *Let not your hearts be troubled.....I will not leave you as orphans....My peace I give to you.* In the midst of their silence and confusion, Jesus says, *Arise, let us go from here.* (John 14:31)

They follow Jesus down the stairs and out into the cool night air. They continue through the winding streets of Jerusalem, down the hill, and out of the city. As they follow the curve of the valley, they pass through ancient vineyards, grape plants that have been bearing fruit for generations. Here Jesus stops. Hemmed in by rows of vines, the disciples gather around. Lamps and torches sputter in the night air.

Jesus reaches for a grape branch and begins. *I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.* (15:1) In the next few minutes Jesus talks quietly about branches and grapes and how a vinedresser cares for his vineyard. What! In the final, precious minutes Jesus would spend with His followers before He would be seized by His enemies He gives them a horticulture lesson? This is the moment and the way Jesus chooses to reveal their destiny.

Perhaps, like the disciples, you have discovered that following Jesus has turned out differently than you expected. Maybe, like them, you have been feeling confused and disillusioned. If so, listen carefully, for your spiritual crisis may be that you have not heard and understood Jesus’ words in the vineyard. You see, Jesus was thinking of you, too, that night. The secrets of the vine that I will show you are our Father’s amazing plan to keep His children flourishing – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We could call them family secrets because they are really only meaningful to disciples like you who have followed your Lord all the way here...past the celebration, outside the city walls, and into the dark.

Think of some things Jesus did not put in His hand to make His point that night in the vineyard: Not money. Not a map for a military or angelic invasion of Jerusalem. Not a teaching summarizing His last three years. Not a prophecy about the future. Jesus was thinking about grapes. Holding the branch of a mature grapevine, He said: *I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 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 bear much fruit.* (John 15:1-2, 5, 8)

In this last, simple, message before His death, Jesus wanted you and me to comprehend with our whole being that He has left us on this planet for one compelling reason – and it has everything to do with fruit. Let us think deeply about Jesus' little lesson:

1. *Jesus is the vine.* You might think that the vine is a long limb that sprawls along the trellis. Actually, it's the trunk of the plant that grows out of the ground. Vineyard keepers traditionally keep the vine at waist height – 36 to 42 inches. The vine ends in a large gnarl from which branches grow in either direction along the trellis.
2. *The Father is the vinedresser.* The vinedresser is the keeper of the vineyard – either the owner or the person hired to tend it. The vinedresser's task is simple – to coax from his plants the most pounds of grapes possible. A healthy and properly tended vineyard means a higher yield.
3. *You and I are branches.* In the vineyard, the branches are the focus of the vinedresser's efforts because they produce the fruit. Branches are tied to a trellis or propped up with sticks to let air circulate, to provide the maximum amount of sunshine, and to allow full access for tending. The vinedresser lovingly cultivates each branch so that it will bear as much fruit as possible.

Clearly, Jesus knew that He was only hours away from death and that He must use these minutes to implant an image in the minds of His disciples that would sustain them in the tribulation ahead.

WHAT IS FRUIT?

For years I read this passage as a general call to Christians to bring others to Christ. But there is no reason to restrict Jesus' meaning of fruit to winning souls. I have traced the words **fruit** and **good works** in the Bible, and they are used nearly interchangeably. For instance, take this verse in Titus 3:14: *Let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they not be unfruitful.*

In practical terms, fruit represents good works – a thought, attitude, or action of ours that God values because it glorifies Him. The fruit from your life is how God receives His due honor on earth. That is why Jesus declares, *By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit.* (John 15:8)

You bear INNER FRUIT when you allow God to nurture in you a new, Christlike quality: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.* (Gal. 5:22)

You bear OUTWARD FRUIT when you allow God to work through you to bring Him glory. That would certainly include sharing your faith. The apostles saw every arena of life as an opportunity to bear fruit. Paul wrote, *God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.* (2 Cor. 9:8) Whether you are shoveling snow for a widow, taking care of an ill relative, or spending a lifetime as a missionary in the jungle, outward fruit appears when your motive is to bring God glory.

Please note: Jesus says, *I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.* (John 15:16) Fruit is your only permanent deposit in heaven. Real fruit always lasts! It is the main earthly reason you were saved. Paul told Christians they were created in Christ Jesus for good works. (Eph. 2:10) This is so important that I want to reiterate it: The New Testament makes it clear that salvation is a gift and that we are saved by grace, through faith, and we cannot earn our way to heaven by doing good works. (Eph. 2:8-9) But the Scripture proceeds to tell us that the purpose for which God saved us is to do good works. (Eph. 2:10)

Jesus hasn't led us to this point just to make our dreams come true. Our dreams, like the disciples', are too small. We are here to fulfill God's dream – that we will bring Him glory through a remarkably abundant life. That is also how we find our greatest personal fulfillment, now and for eternity. The crucial difference between a natural, physical vineyard and you and me is that God has given us free will and we must choose to respond in faith and obedience to the hands of the vinedresser.

BASKETS OF GLORY

It's an early morning during harvest season as you walk through a beautiful vineyard. Between each row you notice harvest baskets resting on the ground – one basket underneath each branch. You guess that the vinedresser has already been here, probably at the crack of dawn.

You pick up the first basket and look inside. Much to your disappointment, you don't see any fruit - some branches don't bear a single grape! Jesus had this kind of branch in mind when He said, *Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit* (John 15:2).

You step over a row and peek into the second basket. Much to your relief you see several healthy clusters of grapes nestled in the bottom. This assures you that some branches are bearing a few grapes if you look hard enough. Jesus described this branch as one that *bears fruit* (Vs. 2).

Fortunately, the next row reassures you. You see a basket more than half full of plump, juicy grapes. In Jesus' illustration, this branch bears *more fruit* (Vs. 2).

As you move to the last row you are thrilled to see a basket overflowing with the biggest, most desirable grapes imaginable. Jesus' description for this branch is that it *bears much fruit* (Vs. 5).

---Each of us is a branch that is producing a clearly defined level of abundance, as follows:

- Basket 1 - "no fruit"
- Basket 2 - "fruit"
- Basket 3 - "more fruit"
- Basket 4 - "much fruit"

---The Father wants more fruit from us so much that He personally and actively tends our lives so we will keep moving up - - from a barren to a productive branch, from an empty to an overflowing basket. And more is always possible. Why? Because we were created to bear fruit, more fruit, and still more fruit! So, which basket do you think represents your life today?

CREATED FOR ABUNDANCE

I have asked audiences all over the world how they would describe the level of fruit-bearing among Christians today. Their responses are consistent. They say that nearly half of all Christians bear little or no fruit. Another third bear some fruit. Only about 5 percent bear a lot. Looking at the Christians you go to church with, do these numbers surprise you? Where do you fit in?

Dear friends, please hear me: Bearing fruit is not some unique experience reserved for a special kind of Christian. It is the plan that God has for every believer. If you suspect that your branch shows little or no fruit, the secrets of the vine are especially for you. Once you realize what God's invisible hand has been doing in your life, and is doing even now, you will begin to flourish right away.

NEXT MONTH:

(In the teaching next month we will discover how God has been personally touching your life (a) through discipline/chastising for correction, and (b) by pruning for growth, with the purpose of enabling every one of us to bear much fruit. Chastising, which is painful, is for sin. It is done because God is displeased with us but because He loves us, *For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.* Pruning, which is also painful, is for self. It is done because God is pleased with us but wants us to die to self that we might bear much fruit! It is crucial that we understand this distinction so that we don't get crosswise with God and circumvent the loving hand of the Vinedresser. *Every branch ...that bears no fruit He takes away. Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*)

GOD, THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGE

Another way the New Testament confirms Jesus' teaching about bearing fruit is the way it teaches about judgment. One of the central teachings of the Bible is that God is Judge and that every soul on earth will stand before Him to be judged on the appointed day. *It is appointed to men to die once, but after this the judgment.* (Heb. 9:27)

Actually, there are two places where the dead will be judged. The first is the judgment of the lost, and the place of judgment will be before the **Great White Throne**: *Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.* (Rev. 20:11-15)

Note: the phrase repeated again and again, that each person will be judged "according to his works." Grant Jeffrey said: "The holiness and justice of God demand that there will be different degrees of punishment that will accurately reflect the different evil deeds and motives of those who reject Christ's forgiveness." And Sinclair Ferguson said, "God's judgment will be intensely personal and individual. God will accurately weigh each person's individual responsibility. He will 'give to each person according to what he has done.'" A few of the many Scriptures substantiating this truth:

- *It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.* (Mt. 10:15)
Verse implies a less tolerable situation in hell.
- *Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.* (Mt. 23:14) Suggesting there is a lesser.
- (One servant beaten with many stripes, another with few.) (Luke 12:42-48)
- *Who will render to each one according to his deeds.* (Ro. 2:6)

I wish with all my being that the Scriptures I have recorded above were not in the Bible. But, without any question, they are in the Bible, they are the revealed truth given to us by God, and we must take warning. Having experienced a little taste of God's judgment when He dealt with me in 1973 because of my backslidden condition, I can't talk about or write about God's judgment without feeling something of the "terror of the Lord." Anyone who does not have some degree of the fear of the Lord as he considers that his every word, action, and motive is recorded in "the books," and that his record will be laid out before God for His final, irrevocable, judgment, is blind and foolish beyond the power of my words to express. The truth is - - we will have to pay for our sins, or we will have trusted in the One who died on a cruel cross and took our sins upon Himself.

The saved will also be judged, at **The Judgment Seat of Christ**: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.* (2 Cor. 5:10)

Note: This judgment is for reward, and it is also based on what each has done; ie, our works.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 explains in more detail: *For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*

It is clear that there will be different degrees of reward for the saints in heaven, and Jesus encourages us to work diligently for the reward that He is eager to give His faithful servants. See the parable of the minas in Luke 19. Jesus also encourages us to store up treasure in heaven: Mt. 6:21, 19:21; Mk. 10:21; Lk. 12:21-34; 18:22.

EXAMINE YOURSELF!

God takes our lives very seriously! That is clear from the Scriptures above, right? This does not mean that God is constantly frowning and judging our lives against an impossibly high standard. No, no, no! It is because of His great love for us, a love so immeasurable that He sent His Son to die a brutal death on the cross in order to rescue us and to give a meaning and purpose to our lives - - the purpose of bearing fruit for Him.

So God reminds us again and again, “Examine yourselves! Make sure that you are in Christ, that you have an inheritance waiting for you in heaven, and that your life will not be found wanting so that you lose the rewards God desires to give you.” Following are a few of our Father’s admonitions:

- *Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves.* (2 Cor. 13:5)
- *Anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup (or you will be bringing) God’s judgment upon yourself.* (This does not mean that we have to rise to perfection, but that we take Communion thankfully and in an attitude of humble repentance.)
- The problem is that our lives and hearts are a mystery to ourselves, so King David prays: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.* (Ps. 139:23-24)
- And in the same spirit, the Apostle Paul writes: *As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don’t even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn’t prove I’m right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide.* (1 Cor. 4:3-4)

CLEANSE YOURSELVES!

Finally, after we have examined ourselves and cried out to God to examine us and show us the true condition of our hearts, we are exhorted to “Cleanse yourselves!”

- *Because we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete holiness because we fear God.* (2 Cor. 7:1)
- *So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.* (Jas. 4:7-10)

Note that God says to us: “Examine yourself. Cleanse yourself. Wash your (own) hands.” God will not do it for us, but we cannot do it without Him. (Phil. 2:12-13)

WOUNDED HORSES AND CHILDREN

I found in my files a story related some years ago by a lady in Oregon, Jan, who has an amazing ministry of rescuing wounded and abused horses, and whose ministry gradually evolved into also rescuing wounded and abused children.

The lady said that some of the horses that were brought to them were so emaciated and abused that they had to be put down. She told about a big, beautiful, horse, about 1,500 lbs.,

that had been beaten terribly. It trembled and shivered as she walked up to it, it threw its head back waiting for blows, and when she gently touched its muzzle with a finger the horse collapsed to the ground waiting for death to come. They brought the horse, Boonie, to the ranch, but it retreated when anyone tried to approach it.

A nine year-old girl named Macy was brought to the ranch. She had been in a terrible accident. She had been riding her horse when it became panicked and ran toward a crossroad into the path of a van. The horse was killed, and Macy suffered terrible injuries. Her helmet saved her life, but she suffered a fractured skull and had 120 stitches in her head and face. The physical injuries were healing, but the emotional injuries, the fear and depression, were ongoing.

Jan told Macy about the way the big horse had been mistreated, and then felt that Macy would be safe to enter the corral by herself. Macy slowly approached the huge horse. It stood over 16 hands tall, and its head was as big as Macy’s body. For the first time Boonie did not retreat. Suddenly the horse bowed his head into her arms and waited for her to remove the halter. As she walked back to the gate, it turned and followed her. When she stopped, he lowered his head over her shoulder and started exploring every stitch, scrape and wound on her head and face. Macy and Boonie gradually recovered.

God Bless

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