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STORIES FROM THE VINEYARD

Part 4 - More Pruning

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

In Part 1, The Purpose of Our Life, Jesus, in John 15, used the analogy of a grapevine and grape harvest to explain that the purpose of our lives is "to bear fruit for God." Fruit, scripturally, is good works. Inner fruit is the fruit of the Spirit, Love, joy, peace, etc. Outer fruit are those things we do that express love and obedience to God.

In Part 2, Chastisement, Jesus explained that the Vinedresser (God the Father) obtains a good harvest from the branches (believers) first by keeping us attached (abiding) in the Vine (Jesus); and then through the process of Chastisement (*Whom the Lord loves He chastens*). Chastening is to correct us for sin.

In Part 3, Pruning, Jesus explained the next step. Pruning is not for sin but for self. God is asking us to let go of things that are not necessarily bad but that distract us from being fruitful. These are things of the world like money, success, friends, hobbies, etc. (Jesus made the same point in the Parable of the Sower and specifically mentioned: *The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the pleasures of this life, and desires for other things*. God wants to be first in our lives and no fooling around about it!) The book of 1 John ends like this: *Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts*.

(Note: If you did not receive the first three teachings, you can find them, along with my monthly teachings for the past several years, on my website: www.glennbrownministries.com)

In today's teaching, Mr. Wilkinson points out a sobering reality: Growers prune their vineyards more intensively as the vines age! One horticultural bulletin explained why: "The vine's ability to produce growth increases each year, but without intensive pruning the plant weakens and its crop diminishes. Mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yields." Think of mature pruning in terms of the Bible phrase, "the testing of your faith." The apostle James writes: *Let the testing of your faith have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing*. In mature pruning, the pruning will intensify as God's shears cut closer to the core of who you are. God isn't trying to just take away, He is at work, making room to add strength, productivity, and spiritual power in your life. His goal is to bring you closer to the perfect and complete image of Christ.

Tests of faith have nothing to do with the status of your salvation – that's a settled fact. Neither are these tests on the level of "Why doesn't God help me find my car keys?" These are trials and hardships that invite you to surrender something of great value to God even when you have every right not to. A psalmist described the refining experience: *For you, O God, tested us; You refined us like silver....But you brought us to a place of abundance*. (Psalm 66:10, NIV) If you pull back when you reach what seems like your limit, you will never grow or know how much you can really trust God. Blaise Pascal wrote: "Pain was the loving and legitimate violence necessary to produce my liberty."

But please note: *Not every painful experience is the result of pruning*. Is your heart breaking because your teenager is into drugs and sex? God did not cause your son to do these things in order to prune you. Are you suddenly facing a future with diabetes or cancer? God isn't purposely constraining your life just to see how you will react. Yet if you invite Him into your circumstances, He will keep His promise to work everything together for your good.

The pain of pruning comes now, but the fruit comes later. Just as in the vineyard, pruning in our lives is seasonal. But the quantity and quality of the future harvest depends on our submission to the Vinedresser now. A season is coming, I promise, when everywhere you look you will see evidence of the amazing faithfulness of our God. Consider the many trials Paul endured. Then consider the incredible size of Paul's harvest. Paul's branch is *still* yielding fruit today.

TELL ME WHERE IT HURTS

How do we know where God is pruning us? Where does it hurt in your life today? God prunes those things that we

slavishly seek first, love most, and refuse to give up: the people we love, the possessions we cling to, our deep sense of personal rights.

Arena 1. The people you love most.

I remember the time I was attending a seminar in Iowa and late one night I was praying for a larger life. “Lord,” I prayed out loud, “You have brought me so far in my life. What is next?” “Your kids,” He said. I told Him I loved my kids. God said, “Give me your kids.” I didn’t have to think. “Nope,” I said. “You can’t have them.”

The hours ticked by. I knelt on the floor in a strange bedroom and wrestled with God. Not until 3 A.M. was I finally able to release my children and my wife into His keeping. (Think again about God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son.) When the transaction was done, those dearest humans in my life no longer belonged to me. While I still love and tend them, the ownership rights passed over to God.

God may be asking you to give up your “right” to be married, to have children, or to achieve a particular kind of success. He may be inviting you to follow Christ without the support of your wife or husband or mother and father, possibly even enduring their hatred and rejection because of your faith.

Arena 2. Your right to know why God does what He does.

We are born with the conviction that we deserve to control our lives. This assumption is in conflict with the life of faith. God asks those who are serious about following Him to give up your “right” to know why certain things are happening to you. (Someone counted the number of times that Job cried out to God in anguish and complaint and it came to 73 times, and God never did explain to Job why he was going through his tribulations. And do you think that Joseph struggled with understanding why he had been betrayed by his brothers and spent 13 years in a foul dungeon? Can you remember times when you cried out, “Lord, I don’t understand!”?)

When he was very young, I took our son David to the hospital for a shot. As the doctor approached with needle in hand, David ran. When I caught him and swung him up into my arms, I saw the terror in his face. How can you explain to a sick toddler that he needs penicillin? When the moment came, David didn’t push me away. He held on tightly and cried out, “Daddy!”

We go through long seasons in our faith walk when we are unable to answer questions like Why? and How long? We only know Who – our loving Father. He asks us to let go of reasons, of rights, of fears, and simply throw our arms around His neck and pray: “Father, I’m holding on to you. You can do whatever you want. Just carry me through.”

Arena 3. Your love for money and possessions.

For most of us, shedding the power that possessions and material comforts hold over us is a lifelong process and one of the most difficult. That is why, season after season, the Vinedresser asks us to let go of the things we still hold too tightly. Ask yourself: How much of what is mine has God already asked for, and have I given it to Him?

If we allow this process of pruning to continue (understand that we can stop the process at any point and say, “No! I don’t want to go any farther.”) an exuberant freedom to bless others will flourish in its place. Read how Paul commended the Macedonian churches for their generosity and joy in the midst of extreme poverty, 2 Cor. 8:1.

Arena 4. The sources of your significance.

We all have a God-given need for a sense of worth and purpose. For Abraham, it was his miracle son, Isaac. For Gideon, it was his large army. What is it for you?

For me, it was the ministry of Walk Thru the Bible, a ministry that God had used me to raise up. I felt that God was asking me to give Him my life’s dream. I vacillated. I postponed. Finally, the day came when I put my connection with that ministry on the altar. God forced me to make a choice: “my” ministry, or God. I chose God. But once I did that, He blessed the ministry, and me, in ways I never imagined.

GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

The apostle Paul described himself as: *Of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee...zeal...legalistic righteousness...flawless.* (Phil. 3) But by the end of his walk with Christ, all of his self-life had been pruned away, and he wrote from prison: *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ....I count all things loss for the knowledge of Christ Jesus my lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count*

them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ. (Phil. 3)

You may be thinking, Sure, a spiritual giant like the apostle Paul can live like that, but what does that have to do with a little normal Christian like me? Paul gives us the answer: *All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.* (vs. 15)

I pray that you will finally be so surrendered to God that everything you now love so dearly, even worthy activities and goals, will be let go into God's keeping, and that your one passion will be: love for your Father, and to bear more fruit for His glory.

Peter described how some Christians in his day were triumphing during severe testing: *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.* (1 Peter 1:6)

WHICH IS MOST IMPORTANT, SALVATION OR HEALING?

In your opinion, which is most important?

1. Praying for a person's salvation
2. Praying for a person's healing
3. Praying for a person's freedom from demonic oppression

That's a no-brainer, right? Healing and deliverance are temporary, while salvation is eternal, it's for this world and forever. So churches ought to focus on the eternal and skip the other ministries that can be peripheral and distracting, right?

This is exactly the argument that was put to me time and again when I was a pastor and that I still hear occasionally. But if this is true, then Jesus had His priorities wrong, for during His earthly ministry He consistently did all three things: *And Jesus went about all Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness among the people, and those who were tormented and demon-possessed...* (Matthew 4:23) And Jesus empowered His followers to do the same three things: *Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and He sent them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out demons.* (Mark 3:14) In Luke 10, Jesus empowered 72 others to do the same three things, and in Mark 16 the resurrected Christ empowered the church to do the same three things. **When Jesus commissioned someone to preach the gospel, He always commissioned them to also heal the sick and cast out demons.**

In fact, this three-fold emphasis is encompassed in Jesus' own job description. In Luke 4:18, Jesus quoted the prophecy in Isaiah 61 that described the ministry or mandate of the Messiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty to those who are oppressed.*

And the famous passage in Isaiah 53 that describes the Savior's ministry reads: *Surely He has borne our sicknesses and carried our pains...but He was bruised for our iniquities...and by His stripes we are healed...and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

I believe we have too narrowly defined the word Salvation itself. Strong's concordance defines Salvation as follows: "*Soteria* is an all-inclusive word signifying forgiveness, healing, prosperity, deliverance, safety, rescue, liberation, and restoration. Christ's salvation is total in scope for the total man: spirit, soul, and body." Bill Johnson's church in Redding, California, has named their ministry after one of the forms of the Greek word salvation, as follows: "SOZO, Saved, Healed, and Delivered."

John Wimber, whom God used to establish the Vineyard fellowship of churches, wrote a book, Power Evangelism, that sold over a million copies and was cited by Christianity Today as "One of the top 50 books that have shaped evangelicals." Following is a quotation from the book: "By power evangelism, I mean a presentation of the gospel that is rational but also transcends the rational. The explanation of the gospel – the clear proclamation of the finished work of Christ on the cross – comes with a demonstration of God's power through signs and wonders. Signs and wonders do not save; only Jesus and His substitutionary work on the cross saves, but when God demonstrates His love and power by healing or freeing someone, receptivity to Christ's claims is usually very high and frequently results in groups of people being saved."

The book states further: "Power evangelism is being practiced in many parts of the world. A closer look at regions where Christianity is on the move shows that power evangelism is a significant factor in the majority of examples of growth. On a worldwide scale, an estimated 70 percent of all church growth is among Pentecostal, Charismatic and Third-wave groups."

I will share one story, among a multitude, from the book: "Dr. Louis Flores was a professor of philosophy of the Central

University in Quito, Ecuador. He had written five textbooks and 200 journal articles in his field, had traveled in Europe and the Soviet Union, and had written a booklet on how to raise the ideal atheist family. He was not a member of the Communist Party but was the intellectual leader of the campus Marxist movement. He took delight in ridiculing the faith of anyone who might believe in God – Catholic or Protestant.

In May of 1982, the Puerto Rican Pentecostal evangelist Yeye Avila held an evangelistic campaign in Quito's bull ring. Flores's wife and oldest daughter, Gabriela, were invited and decided to attend one of the meetings. Both women were physically healed, and as a result they became Christians. Gabriela also spoke in tongues. The younger children also became Christians during the campaign.

Shortly afterward, Dr. Flores arrived home from the university to find his family on their knees praying for his salvation. When Gabriela saw her father enter the room, she said, 'Daddy, I'm going to prove to you once and for all that there is a God and that Jesus Christ is alive today. I'm going to sing for you in a language I've never learned. She then proceeded to sing as the Holy Spirit gave her words. She sang in Russian, then German, then Italian, then French, and finally in English. It was music that exalted the Lord. It was sung to a well-known tune, "La Tabacundena," written by the professor some years before. Dr. Flores was familiar with each language, and he knew that Gabriela did not know them. The experience left him shaken.

He did not sleep that night. The next morning, he cancelled all of his classes and locked himself inside his office, where he trembled because of the presence of a Power he was unable to deal with. That evening, he returned home to find his family praying for him. Gabriela again approached him this time laying hands on him and prophesying over him with great authority. The Holy Spirit even revealed to her specific hidden sins in his life. The professor had had enough. He dropped to his knees, praying, "Lord, I am a fool," and offered his life to God. At that time, Dr. Flores recalls, God picked him up off the floor and shook him like a doll three times. In the process, he was healed of a displaced fifth lumbar vertebra, hemorrhoids and numerous allergies. He also spoke in tongues.

Dr. Flores's conversion stuck. On March 24, 1989, he was ordained, and he eventually became the pastor of Centro Cristiano Vida Abundante, where he led a rapidly growing flock. Dr. Flores also oversaw an outreach ministry to 1,500 Quichua Indians living in a remote district of Ecuador."

Why have we reduced Christianity to a one-dimensional, intellectual, presentation that is powerless to rescue a society that is rapidly sinking into darkness?

John Wimber said that the Western worldview has permeated the church so strongly that we automatically and subconsciously explain away the revelation of reality that God has given us in the Bible:

1. *Secularism.* The assumption of secular minds is that we live in a material universe closed off from divine intervention, in which truth is arrived at only through rational thought.
2. *Materialism.* Materialism assumes nothing exists except matter. Western people have developed a series of laws and principles for almost all areas of life: medicine, physics, philosophy, economics and so on, and these are the principles that we assume are stable and dependable.
3. *Rationalism.* Rationalism should not be confused with rational thinking. Rationalism accepts reason as the only and highest authority in life. Supernatural events are automatically rejected, especially events like healings, miracles, and deliverance from evil spirits. Rationalism, therefore, is a non-Christian philosophy. Angels, demons, and God cannot be scientifically measured; therefore, they do not exist.

GLIMPSES OF GOD'S LOVE

John Wimber explained the supernatural things that Jesus did: power over demons, power over disease, power over nature, power over death - - as glimpses of God's love. He gave an example of how these things are happening today with the following story: "Father Rick Thomas led a group in El Paso, Texas, called the Lord's Food Bank, and in 1981 they carried food over the border into a jail in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Based on previous trips to the jail, they brought enough food for 75 or so men – 4 pans of bread pudding, 600 tortillas, a pot of lemonade, and some lentils and chili.

Much to their surprise, there were far more than 75 men in the jail that day. As the inmates streamed from the first cell, it seemed that the line would never end. "Because we had no spoon, they were dipping the bread pudding out with paper plates and piling their plates high. According to jail officials, there were 170 men in that first cell. In all, there were around 250 men in the jail. The pudding in the 4 pans lasted for all the prisoners, and the 600 tortillas, which were served 4 to each prisoner so that they should have served only 150 men, fed the whole group as well."

Father Thomas relates: As many in the group became aware of what was happening, they started dancing and praising

God with great joy. Some of the musicians quit playing and started carrying food for second and third helpings for all the prisoners who wanted more. They even fed the administrators and the guards. The prisoners were so moved by the kindness of God and the kindness of our team that it led to a breakthrough in the lives of many of them.”

Let me (Glenn) share about a little experience that happened in our cell group just this past Wednesday night: As we were praying at the end of our meeting, a lady asked for prayer for her right knee. She broke it badly in a fall on an icy street about two years ago, and it has never healed right. She said she has lived in constant pain and it is wearing her out. I asked her how bad the pain was at that moment on a scale of 1 (the least) to 10 (agonizing pain). She said it was at level 7. I’ve learned that unforgiveness in the heart blocks physical and emotional healing, so I start every time of ministry by searching out any unforgiveness. I asked her, “Do you blame anyone for this injury and all the pain?” She said Yes, she blamed God and herself.

I led her to pray: “Heavenly Father, I forgive you for my injury and pain, and I repent for blaming you. I know you are a good God and that you did not cause that accident, and I am sorry I have been blaming you. And I forgive myself for falling and hurting myself.” Then we prayed for her knee - - had her stand, and she said that the pain immediately went down to a level 2!

I said, Let’s get it down to zero. As we talked more, she referred to her knee as “An angry knee.” Ah ha! Sometimes people become angry at the part of their body that is causing them pain and start “cursing” their own body. I had her say, “Lord Jesus, I repent for cursing my knee by calling it an angry knee. I bless my knee and I bless you for healing it. Lord, I give you my pain and suffering and all my emotional struggle over this issue, and what do you give me in return?” As she waited quietly, she heard the Lord say, “Relief!” And her pain went to zero! Yea, God!

Jesus said, *Those who believe will lay their hands on the sick and they will be healed.* Are you a believer? If so, you qualify to pray for healing.

John Wimber also shared stories about other miracles, including the story of an 8-month old boy who drowned in the family swimming pool, was pronounced dead, was prayed for and was resurrected. The doctors explained away the supernatural aspect of this event, and so would most of us. We have a strong bias against believing in a supernatural God who does signs and wonders among us today. Don’t we? Maybe we should ask God to help us break through into a Biblical worldview.

God Bless Glenn

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I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.

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