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Sermon: November 15, 2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE VINE”
John 15:1-8

- {Mt 7:15-16} In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warns us against malicious deceivers who *look* like the sheep of his flock but are **“ferocious wolves”** in disguise. **“By their fruit you will recognize them,”** he says.

📖 The Savior is not talking about apples and bananas. He is using **“fruit”** as a metaphor for habits and actions that disclose one’s true nature.

- {Mt 7:17-20} Wolves can pretend to be sheep for a while, but sooner or later the mask will slip. **“Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.... Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”**

Spiritual predators are not the only ones who bear **“bad fruit”**. It is possible to be sincere and harmless *and* have meager or rotten fruit.

For that reason, the usefulness of the “fruit test” is not limited to unmasking wolves in sheep’s clothing. It is equally helpful for evaluating ourselves.

❓ What **“fruit”** are we producing?

❓ Do our patterns of conduct show us to be robust or frail, healthy or sick, productive or unproductive?

“By [our] fruit” will we be recognized!

▣ Please turn with me to John 15:1-8.

- In verses 1b-2 Messiah reveals just how important it is to bear good and plentiful fruit: **“My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no**

fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

- In verse 5 he explains, **“I am the vine; you”** – my disciples – **“are the branches.”**

“Every branch in me that bears no fruit,” every fruitless disciple, **“the gardener” “cuts off.”**

Takes away is a more literal translation of the verb αἰρῶ [aíró], but **“cuts off”** better conveys its ominous overtones. Jesus uses exactly the same verb in Matthew 21:43 when he notifies his enemies, **“the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.”**

❓ Were these fruitless branches ever actually **“in”** Christ, or did they merely appear to be? That is debatable.

☆ What is certain is that the failure to bear fruit has a grim outcome. As a direct consequence of their fruitlessness, the Father cuts them off from the Son.

{Jn 6:51} Elsewhere, the Son declares, **“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.”**

{John 8:12} And, **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me...will have the light of life.”**

{Jn 11:25} And, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”**

{Jn 14:6} And, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”**

Hence, to be taken from the Son is to be cut off from God who creates, redeems, and sustains life. It is to bear the brunt of mortality, death of the body, soul, and spirit, if not immediately in time than forever in eternity.

“Every branch in me that bears no fruit,” every fruitless disciple, **“the gardener” “cuts off.”**

{Ezek 33:11} Does this make you uncomfortable?

Does it disturb you a little? I hope so! YHWH himself has said, **“As surely as live, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!”**

But there are two things to keep in mind here.

★ First, this severing is not impulsive or merciless; it is the culmination of ongoing, gracious intervention.

- Hear the Parable of the Fig Tree in Luke 13:6-9:

“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, he [looked] for fruit on it but did not find any. He said to the man who [tended] the vineyard, ‘For three years... I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

★ Second, this severing does not initiate death; it brings the process of dying to its end.

The branches of a fruit-bearing tree or shrub or vine exist to bear fruit. It is their reason for being.

It follows that any branch which, year-after-year does not bear fruit despite the proper conditions, even after an extended cycle of intensive and skillful loving care, is not really alive. It might be leafy, but it only gives the appearance of life. The branches that are severed were already as good as dead.

There is a tragic aspect to the cutting off. It is an occasion for grief! However, it is not unjust.

“The gardener... cuts off every branch... that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

📖 Pruning is the intentional removal of certain branches, shoots, buds and leaves. To put it another way, it is selective amputation.

The crucial thing about pruning is this: done right, it is beneficial. Not only does it give the plant a more beautiful form, it also stimulates it to produce more fruit. A well-pruned tree or shrub or vine has more abundant life.

Spiritual pruning is when the LORD removes things from our lives that hinder our fruitfulness. Those “branches, shoots, buds and leaves” include sinful behaviors, false beliefs, detrimental attitudes, harmful habits, and entanglements that are neutral or good in themselves, but which distract us or cause us to stumble.

{Ro 2:15; II Ti 3:16; Pr 27:17; I Co 2:11-16} Sovereign God has a wide range of pruning tools at his disposal. Human conscience “[bears] **witness**” to the Creator’s will. Experiences of frustration, failure, hardship, sickness, pain, loss, and grief are often a catalyst for

significant growth. Holy **“Scripture is... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”** **“As iron sharpens iron, so one [Christ Follower] sharpens another.”** And the Holy Spirit speaks directly into our hearts that we might **“[know] the mind of the Lord.”**

Let’s not sugarcoat this: being pruned never feels good at the time. A degree of discomfort is inevitable, ranging from mild irritation to excruciating agony.

However, it is never gratuitous or excessive. It is necessary and proportional. As a grape vine exists to bear grapes, so in Christ we have been created to bear spiritual fruit. Pruning stimulates the growth of fruit, and the more fruit we bear the more alive we are.

‡ But what is spiritual fruit?

Galatians 5:22-23: **“But the *fruit* of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”**

Ephesians 5:8-9: **“Live as children of light (for the *fruit* of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth).”**

James 3:17-18: **“The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a *harvest* of righteousness.”**

In John 15:9-17 Messiah narrows the description of fruit to one thing: righteous love.

📖 Spiritual fruit is Christ-like character that consistently yields words and deeds of *αγαπη* [agapē]. Inward being

and outward doing are indivisible, and both are absolutely necessary.

“The gardener... cuts off every branch... that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”

‡ This begs the question: How can we effectively cooperate with God to increase our own fruitfulness?

First, the negative answer: we do *not* become more fruitful by trying harder. Trying harder appears to be an attractive option. That is why most religions are predicated on the theory that trying harder is the one essential.

But I suggest that if human resolve and effort were the key, the world would be a dramatically different place. Trying harder does not produce good fruit; it produces pride, frustration, and exhaustion. It makes us less fruitful.

■ Now, the constructive answer: John 15:4-5:

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

“Remain in me.”

{Jn 1:4} The Lord Jesus is the center vine, the main stalk, the big trunk. **“In him [is] life.”**

We are the branches. Our life is in him.

And so the better our attachment to Jesus, the stronger our bond, the deeper our relationship, the more firmly we remain in him. The more firmly we remain in him, the more alive we are. The more alive we are, the more fruit we will produce.

The key to fruitfulness is a vibrant connection with the true vine. He is more than able to provide us with the resources we need to produce good fruit.

God is the Initiator in all this. He reaches out to us, and we respond. Still, there are practical ways to cultivate openness.

✎ We can draw near to the Lord in prayer and worship.

✎ We can get better acquainted by reading, studying, meditating on, and acting on his Word.

✎ We can be mindful of his presence, attentively and expectantly looking for signs of his presence and his work in our lives.

✎ We can do justice and love mercy, serving others in practical ways. As we humbly love others by serving them in the name of Jesus, he is there with us.

✎ We can protect our bond with God by resisting temptation. When we sin, we can restore and renew our connection by repenting and turning back to him.

✎ We can do these things as individuals and also as a gathered body. Not as a matter of trying harder, but of seeking the Lord.

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you... I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me

and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15 is the Word of the Lord.