

# The Vine and the Branches

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In Hosea 14:8, listen to this verse: "O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like a luxuriant cypress; from Me comes your fruit." That's what God said to Ephraim. And it's very important because the word "Ephraim" - the name - means fruitfulness. He named them "fruitfulness," but the problem was this tribe began to think they were the source of their own fruitfulness. And God said, "No, I am the source of all your fruitfulness." Another thing that this text teaches us is this: We must resist the pride that may spring forth from fruitfulness.

You know, some progress in the Christian life can also be dangerous. That's why God does not allow us sometimes to experience all the progress that we'd hoped for because it would turn and work against us in pride. Because we're too immature to really be used to bear such fruit. If you and I are always just pulling off this Christian life by means of our pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps; if we are doing this Christian life in our own power, then what we are going to see is a constant state of inconsistency because we're inconsistent. We are inconsistent and that evermore should encourage us to do what? To abandon all hope in self and to draw upon Christ, to draw upon Christ, to draw upon Christ that we might bear consistent, consistent fruit. His fruit that He bears in the life of the believer will always be a reflection of His own holiness and righteousness. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Don't you want to be like that? Well, if you desire to be like that, you must abandon all hope - all hope in self, all hope in secondary means. And you must run, run, run to Jesus Christ. Run to Christ. All other vines are useless. All other sources are useless. Jeremiah 2:13 says, "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water." My dear friend, God will, through His discipline as we're going to see in a moment - work in every one of our lives destroying not only idols, but destroying every false source from which we might attempt to draw. He will frustrate everything until we are focused in on Christ and Christ alone, the excellencies of Christ, the finished work of Christ, the continuing work of Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ. All other vines also lead to barrenness. Jeremiah 17:5-6, "Thus says the Lord, 'Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength.'" So that doesn't sound like a source or a fountain or a vine, oh, my dear friend. I would say of all things that men trust in other than Christ, it is the flesh. And all sources that are offered to you is nothing more than a manifestation of the flesh. It's not Jesus Christ. "And makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord. For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant."

My dear friend, brother and sister in Christ, I am probably the most appropriate person in this building to give this message because I am so prone to draw strength at times from things that give no strength whatsoever. And even when the devil works - because God does use the

devil - no, it is for our good. Absolutely everything is for our good. The problem is many times we do not understand the good. The good isn't big ministries. The good isn't fame in the Christian life. The good isn't that after we die, someone will write a book about us. The good isn't that we are respected as the greatest pastor in the world. The good is that we look like Jesus. That we look like Christ. I'm going to say something that's going to sound very, very vulgar, very horrid, but I am going to say it so that you can grasp the meaning: that being like Jesus is so important in God's eyes in Christianity that one could rightfully say almost to hell with everything else. So many times underneath us are these ulterior motives that are hellish. What is the greatest privilege? To be able to preach like Spurgeon? No! To look like Jesus. When we talk about fruit we're automatically in our American mindset thinking about activity instead of character, character, character, Christlikeness, Christlikeness. Many times the Lord loves you too much to give you the things you're praying for because He wants to give you something better - Christlikeness.

Now, if we look at this text, He says, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away." What does He mean? Let me just make this statement. There are men and women, young and old, in every congregation who identify with the people of God, but are unbelieving and fruitless and when they die, they will go to hell. That's exactly what this passage means. (Incomplete thought) Let's just look at the church for a moment as a vineyard. Within this vineyard, there are some who they kind of look like branches. They kind of act a bit like branches on a superficial level. But when you really look at them they are fruitless. They are unbelieving. They are not connected to the Vine. And they will be judged. They will be torn away. They will be judged. They will be cast into hell. Listen to what Jude says in verse 12. "These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts, and when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves, clouds without water, carried along by winds, autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted..." I have described a great majority of church membership rolls all throughout this country. And we think that we can somehow cure these men by more discipleship when the fact of the matter is they need the Gospel and they need regeneration. They eat right with you. They participate in the supper. They go to the Lord's Supper. They participate in the feasts that you might have afterwards. All these things. And you never recognize them. They're always caring for themselves. One thing you will notice in an unconverted person, selfishness is the greatest - it is the opposite of love. All they care about is self.

Let me read you a passage in Ezekiel 19:12. Speaking of apostate Israel, it says, "Its strong branch was torn off so that it withered; the fire consumed it." I don't care how strong your religion is or how strong your church life is. I don't care how strong your morality is. At the day of judgment, God will tear it down. Tear it down and it will wilt. It'll wilt. Whenever humans declare themselves to be righteous, they are doing it by contrasting themselves with other humans who are worse. And you can get away with that, but when your righteousness is contrasted with the righteousness of God, there is nothing but to throw yourself down and declare your morality to be dung. Believer, here is really the question. In a type of contemporary Christianity that makes comfort its goal, you are going to have to make a decision. What do you want? Do you want to bear more fruit? Or do you want to be comfortable and just grow wild?

I can remember one time in Peru prior to having both of my hips replaced. And arthritis had eaten my hips to the point of almost not being able to walk anymore. Every day was a trial. Every day was a struggle. The pain was incredible. And I walked out on this balcony one morning in Lima, Peru, and it was wet and rainy and the humidity was horrible and my legs were hurting so bad. And I had tears running down my face and I walked out there. I limped out on the patio and I looked up at God and I said, "Why? I hurt so bad." No, I did not hear a voice, but I knew exactly what the Lord wanted to say to me. "Paul, dear, dear son... this is exactly what you asked Me for." And then I remembered all those times in college after my conversion; all those times in seminary when with other believers, you know, we would pray through the night and say, "Oh, Lord, anything You have to do, Lord, to make me like Jesus, do it." You know, some of you probably: "Lord, kill me if it's necessary." And I think He allows us to pray like that in ignorance because if we really knew what we were asking for we would be too fearful to pray. Is it your greatest passion to produce the character of Jesus Christ? That desire of yours may cost you absolutely everything. It may be the reason God never allows you to go public - become famous. It might be the reason why you never get a megachurch. It might be the reason why you never see any apparent success. It might be the reason for physical ailments. (Incomplete thought) Your desire at any cost to bear goodly fruit, to be like Jesus Christ may cost you everything.

But everything's worth it, isn't it? If fruit - true spiritual fruit - a reflection of the true character of Jesus Christ is the most important thing in your life, isn't it worth any cost? It should be worth any cost. We are talking about a lifetime of training, a lifetime of discipline, a lifetime of pruning, a lifetime of cutting, a lifetime of cleansing up until the day we close our eyes in this world. Do you want that? Well, I can tell you this. I do... because I have already gone through 22 years of it. And my Master's pruning is sweeter than all the delicacies this world can offer me. It is more loving than all the flattery this world can offer me. Here's the prize. It's not what you think. The prize is conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. The true believer is going to bear fruit. Do you realize that? If you are a true believer, you are going to bear fruit. You have to bear fruit because you really are a branch and you really are connected to the Vine and you can't do anything but bear fruit. But the Father comes by and He prunes you and He disciplines you and He shapes you and He cuts you and He ties you and He does everything He has to do so that you will bear more fruit. Discipline will not make you bear fruit. You are going to bear fruit. If you are not going to bear fruit, you are not a believer. In periods of apparent fruitlessness we must trust the Lord. Especially for some of you young fellows in college or you're going to seminary and you're just: I want to do something. Well, be very careful of that language you're using. I don't want to do anything anymore. I want to be something. I want to be like Jesus. If I get my ontology right, everything else is going to fall in place. Don't concentrate so much on doing something. Concentrate on being something.

You know, one of the greatest problems in Christianity today and one of the great problems in Christian ministry or ministers today is that we no longer believe there's a need for a hidden season. Jesus - 30 years for three years of ministry. John the Baptist - at least 30 years, for what? Six months of ministry. Moses - 80 years of hiddenness to bear this great overwhelming fruit of God: redemption of the people of Israel. Now we just want to jump out there, don't we? We want to do something instead of waiting to be something. I can think of

times where God has hidden me in His fold. And I want to tell you something, being up in a pulpit, doing things like that where everyone can see is not necessarily the sign that God's hand is upon you and that He's going to use you. But when God calls you into that hidden place to be alone with Him, my friend, that's the sign. That is the sign. When He isolates you from everyone else, He doesn't let anyone touch you. He doesn't let you walk down those kind of roads. He doesn't let you turn the grace of God into a circus. He doesn't let you play all those games. He doesn't let you go to America's Six Flags over Jesus and ride the rides. He hides you away. That's the sign His hand is upon you. The secret work.

Now, this is not just for ministers. Some of you have struggled in the darkness. Some of you have sat up at night. Some of you have thought through your salvation. You've wrestled with sin. You've gone through spiritual battles no one has known about. You've seen inconsistencies, impurities in your life you've had to deal with. My friend, that is a mark. That is a mark of God's hand upon you. A mark of God's hand. Listen to me very carefully. There was a time when I knew I needed to turn my eyes away from certain things because I knew it wasn't pleasurable to God. Know that. It's what some of you do. You see something. You're attracted to it. You turn your eyes away because you know God's not pleased with it. I want you to know there will come a time in your life when you're not pleased with it either. That's not being spoken of enough. Do you think that all our life we are just going to have to walk through life saying, "Well, you know, I would like to look at that, but I can't." No! God's going to do an inner work in your life and gradually more and more you're going to come to the point where you hate the things God hates and you love the things God loves more and more and more. It's really going to happen. It's really going to happen. And it's going to continue happening until the day you go on into glory. To abide in the Vine is to recognize this tremendous, supernatural work of God that has been done in you and just stay there in it. To live in the reality that you have become united with Christ. You are a new creature flowing out of Him. And flowing out of Him is this ever flowing never ending nourishment called the Holy Spirit - the divine sap of God. It's not doing something. It's recognizing what God has done. God has made you a part of His Son - the true Vine - and He is flowing His power through that Vine to you, a branch. You have one purpose: the fruit that flows from the life that I will give you. Don't try to be a brilliant teacher. Don't try to be a superhero. Don't try to over here and get some hobby that takes over you life and consumes you. I didn't make you for this or that. I didn't make you for the world. I didn't make you to impress them. I didn't make you to do the things that they do or to bear the fruit that they bear. I didn't make you for any of that, Paul. I made you to bear the fruit that is within the context of My will for you to bring Me pleasure.

One of the greatest truths I ever heard I heard from Brother Morrow. I don't even know if you remember this. But my holistic view of God was tremendously changed by this. God does everything for His own glory. Is that not true? Right? Why would God plant the most beautiful rose that He ever created? Why would He plant it in a wilderness that no one will ever pass through? I mean, why would He do that? No one will ever see it. How will He be glorified by it? I'll tell you how and why. He did it for Him. He did it because when He looks down at it He'll say, "I like this." I want to tell you something and this will help you. I have not mastered this truth. Don't think I have. But this truth has been a great comfort to me. I want to be that rose out in the middle of that wilderness. That's the ambition. One day, dear friends, when the kingdom of God

comes in the fullness of its power and the Son of Man comes with all the holy angels, we are going to just be literally shocked by one major thing that's going to happen. All these hidden, little, unknown believers that were not movers and shakers; that were not famous; they were over here just like locked away in a closet, shut up to God. They are going to come forth shining like the sun. Right now, my little boy, all he needs is dad. I mean, he's oblivious literally to like little buddies and friends and everything else. It's dad. Dad, let's go do this. Everything he does, he looks up: "Dad." "Did you see this, Dad?" "Look what I did, Dad." There will come a day - and it's a natural course of life - where he'll want to show other people stuff. Now that's a natural course of life. There's no reason to be depressed about it or anything. But, see, in the spiritual realm, that's never supposed to happen. It's always supposed to be: "Look at me, Dad." "I'm bearing fruit, Dad... fruit You've given me, Dad. And it doesn't matter, Dad, that I'm out here in the middle of a desert where no one on the face of the earth can even see me, because the only thing that matters to me is You're pleased."

Again, I want to say something to you. This has been a great help to me. This has been a great help to me. The other day - I want to give you an example. I turned. My wife was walking to me. I turned. I said something I shouldn't have said to her. I mean, it was just a small thing, but it was something I should not have said. It was a tiny thing. The voice just a little bit altered in the wrong way. I mean, it wasn't a violent crime. And I stopped and I just stood there based upon this truth. I stood there and I said, "This is not me." That answer I just gave, that look on my face, that is not me. This is not the new creation. I am not like this and I'm stopping it right now. And I turned around and I said, "Charo, this is not me. I am a new creature created in the image of God in true righteousness and holiness. I am to be patient and kind and loving and forgiving. Forgive me because I've acted in a way that conflicts with who I really am. I will not give into this because this is not who I am anymore."