

THE PARABLE OF THE VINE

Week #3 of the 4-Week Series, "The Parables of Jesus"

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So how many people here like fruit? [Laughs] Here are some fruit jokes. Why did the banana go to the doctor? Because he wasn't peeling well. [Congregants laugh] Okay. What happens when you step on grapes? They whine. [Congregants laugh] Why did the man get fired from the juice -- orange juice -- factory. He couldn't concentrate. [Congregants laugh] Okay. [Laughs]

And so, the reason I shared those fruit jokes is because, in the Bible, they mention fruit a lot ... sometimes specific ones like figs and dates, but also mention different aspects and symbolism with fruit: the first fruits; the fruits of the Spirit; the fruits of our labor; good fruit, bad fruit.

In the Book of Genesis we are told to be fruitful and multiply. In Galatians it actually lists the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, hope, peace, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Jesus said, "*You will know my disciples by their fruits.*"

In fact, if you look at it -- and particularly in the parables -- many of the parables were about one thing: about our responsibility to bear good fruit. And we are all called here to bear good fruit, which comes in many forms. And one of them is to live a God-centered life. To produce good; to bring and express the best in ourselves; to deepen our faith; to bring forth the glory of God and help bring forth the kingdom of heaven right here and now.

You know, bearing good fruit is not just about what we do; it's not just about doing; it's not about having; it is also about being.

And so, we all need to ask ourselves a question: Am I bringing forth and bearing good fruit as much as I can? And what more good am I here to produce and bring forth?

So, in Week #3 of our four-week series on the parables ... You know, parables are simple stories with a common everyday type experiences that help us go a little deeper and understand the spiritual truths behind it: truths to help our lives to live in a more spiritually centered way.

Week #1 we did the Pearl of Great Price. Last week we did the Parable of the Talents. And today, we're going to look at the Parable of the Vine. It appears in John 15, Verses 1-8. And I'll read it for us:

"I am the true vine, and 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 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. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up and thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory: that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

So, we're going to look at this fabulous parable and analyze it to share the three things we can do to bear good fruit.

And the first thing this teaches us is to **REMAIN CONNECTED**. You know, the vine and the branches are connected, and they must remain connected if the branch is to thrive. Remaining connected is the only way that the branch can grow and flourish and produce good fruit.

Spiritually, that connection between the branch and the vine is like our connection to the Spirit of God in us; to the Christ in us; to that divine essence that is within each of us. Staying connected means that we must consciously connect to the Source if we want to bear good fruit.

When it says, *"Remain in me, and I also remain in you,"* this whole idea of remaining speaks to the conscious choice to stay connected to our divine Source on a daily basis. You know, remaining connected is an ongoing process. In the same way that a branch relies on the vine every day for its nutrients, we must connect spiritually with God, our source, every day for our daily bread; for our spiritual guidance.

You know, if a branch is disconnected or separated from the vine, it withers. It loses its source of nourishment, and it cannot produce good fruit. No branch can produce fruit by itself.

So how many people here have ever felt distant or disconnected from God to the point you've lost your faith or lost your joy? Anybody ever have that experience? Okay, about half of us; great. [Congregants laugh]

And how many people, even when your life is going well, have you ever had a time where you still felt out of sorts? That you still didn't feel connected and felt ... you felt a little lost, a little empty and alone? And even though everything on the outer is looking fine, there's something inside that isn't feeling connected? That isn't feeling grounded?

And that is when we experience what we call divine discontent or spiritual stagnation. It is when we are separated and feel distant from God to the point that we feel hopeless; that we feel powerless; we feel stuck; we feel lost.

Somebody once said, *"If you feel distant from God, who moved?"* And it is because that separation -- like from the vine and the branch -- is actually spiritually within ourselves. We feel distant. We feel lost because we have not remained connected and done the things that need to help us remain connected. And it is only through our active participation in our spiritual life, in our spiritual practice, in our spiritual awareness that we can remain connected and bear the best fruit we can.

Notice how many times they use the word "remain" in that passage? It was used eight times. They used the word "remain" eight times in eight verses. They were using "remain" to remind us to remain connected, because it is not something we all do. Sometimes we feel disconnected from God; sometimes we feel lost. Sometimes when we're meditating, we just don't feel that connection. So, we need to actively participate and do our work consistently and consciously to remain connected so we can bear good fruit.

Here are the three ways we can remain connected.

The first one is to **seek God with all your heart**. You know, the only prerequisite for prayer is sincerity. It says in Jeremiah, *"If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart."* A sincere heart and a sincere desire to feel a connection with God is the most vital thing for remaining connected.

Gandhi said, *"Prayer is not asking; it is the longing of the soul. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart."* Sincerity is the number one thing to remain connected: to seek God sincerely.

And then the second one is to **believe the power is in you**. Jesus said, *"He who believes in me shall do the things that I have done and even greater things than these."* Always impressed with that. It's like, wow! That means we have got that Christ potential in us!

And what he is saying is: *"If you believe in that power of the Christ that is in you, the way I believe that it's in me, through that power you shall do the things that I have done and even greater things than these."*

Paul put it this way: *"Christ in you, your hope of glory."*

Paul also put it this way: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!

Let's say that together: [with congregants] *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Take a deep breath into that and let it be real ... because it is the truth.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Now even softer. Together: [with congregants] *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

And so, the third one to remain connected is to **abide in love, for God is love**. And to abide in love ... and that is to love others; to express compassion; to express acceptance; kindness; and especially forgiveness of others is vital if we want to remain connected. To produce good fruit, it must include love. To create a happy life, it must include love. To live life and live it more abundantly, it must include love.

And to ask ourselves in situations where we've got tension with someone in our life is to ask: What would love do? What would love call me to do in this moment? In this relationship? And in this situation?

The first thing this wonderful parable teaches us is to remain connected. Like the vine and the branch, we need to remain connected. And that is by being sincere, seeking God sincerely; believing the power's in us; and abiding in love.

The second thing it teaches us is that **GROWTH COMES THROUGH CUTTING AND PRUNING**.

Here's what he says, *"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. If you do not remain in me, you are like branches that are thrown and withered; such branches are picked up and thrown into the fire."*

When we think of growth, we love hearing things like bearing good fruit, planting the seeds, growth and harvest, success, everything going well. But when we think about success, we don't think about cutting things off; pruning things back; giving things up; letting go and releasing those things.

And yet, in gardening and in our spiritual life, the ability to let go of things that aren't serving us -- let go of things that aren't for our highest good -- is a vital part of spiritual growth. Michael Beckwith said, *"One hundred percent of spiritual growth is about letting go!"*

And so, cutting off what is dead -- cutting off what is not producing and pruning back things -- are a vital part of things growing: there being regrowth; there being renewal. And so, this is an important thing.

And notice it says **for the things that aren't producing, you've got to cut them off. But even for the things that are, you've got to prune**. And to me, that's a vital and important message: to say we always need to be looking at our lives to remain connected, but also to remain pruning. To look at life and say: What is not serving me? And what do I need to let go?

And so, what are the things in your life that are not producing good? What are the things in your life that are not healthy? That are not helpful? That are not positive? So, what in your life is not working? And what in your life needs to be cut out and for you to let go? Maybe it's a toxic relationship. Maybe it's a friendship that is just draining and doesn't really serve you any longer. Maybe it's a negative habit.

Maybe it is fear or worry. What is the thing in your life that is not good for you that is time for you to let go, time for you to release, time for you to cut it out of your life?

And so, what in your life are you allowing to stop you from bearing good fruit? Because whatever that thing that's stopping you, it's probably time for us to let it go and cut it out. And so, the second thing it does: it tells you to even look at the areas of your life that are working. See what you can do to prune and tweak them so they can work even better.

So, do you like the way you're showing up in your life on a daily basis? I would guess most of us think we're doing pretty good. But then we got to ask ourselves is: What can I do to tweak how I show up so I can show up more positive? More joyful? More playful? More grateful?

So, do you like how you are taking care of yourself and treating yourself in terms of taking care of your health and your wellness? Or is there something you need to do to tweak to be more supportive and more caring in the way that maybe that you eat or sleep or take care of yourself. To be more loving to yourself, what would those tweaks be?

And then, do you like how you're treating everybody in your life? Or is there something you need to tweak to treat the people at work or your family or your partner in a greater way? Maybe to listen more effectively, Maybe to be more patient. To maybe be more open and sharing and honest.

I don't know what it is, but every one of ... this is calling every one of us to look at even the good areas of our lives and ask: How can I tweak it? How can I prune it? How can I do something to bring forward new growth to open a space for even greater good and greater possibilities?

When Socrates said, "*The unexamined life is not worth living,*" I thought, "*Whoa! That sounds harsh.*" But what he was saying is life is so worthwhile, it behooves us to pause and ask ourselves: Am I living my life the way I really want to? Am I living my life in the best way that I can?

And that's what he's talking about in this situation. It is pruning. Pause and look and think about how we're living our lives and ask: Is there a better version of ourselves than needs to come forth? Is there more love or more joy that I'm holding back that I could express in greater and better ways?

Staying connected, remaining connected; and working on ourselves: of pruning and cutting away the things that are not bringing forth our best.

And then the third one is to **ASK WHAT YOU WISH**. And I'll read again from the passage. It says, "*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done. This is my Father's glory: that you may bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples.*"

Asking is declaring your desire to the universe. Asking is clarifying the good that you want to call forth from the infinite field of possibility. And notice it says "*whatever.*" Whatever means that there is unlimited good available to each and every one of us.

You know how powerful asking is? Asking ignites the process of creation, the creative process. Asking sets things in motion to bring forth and manifest the good that we desire. Asking actually opens and expands us to the fullness and the abundance of the universe.

"Ask and you shall receive."

You know, the universe has created us, and we are here as creators to create. We live in a supportive, responsive universe. The thing is: we need to participate and ask and open up the doors of possibilities for our lives. You know, asking is a powerful, powerful practice.

Sometimes we're scared to ask. We're afraid to ask in our lives and our relationships. And even in our spiritual life we're afraid to ask for the fullness and the goodness to the things that we desire.

So, my question for you is: What do you want to ask for? What do you want to declare to the universe? What message do you want to send to your Source? What is it that you want to tell God, *"Bring it on. I'm opening a space for this greater thing in my life"*?

And maybe it is for health and healing. Maybe it's for the healing of our bodies. Maybe it's for the healing of our families. You know, maybe it's to heal a broken heart. Maybe it's to increase our income. Maybe it is to find a more fulfilling employment. Maybe it's to have legal issues resolve themselves in the best way possible. Maybe it's to connect with what our true purpose is. Maybe it is improving the relationship we're in or attracting the ideal relationship we want. Maybe it's for more balance. Maybe it's for more energy. Maybe it's for being more discerning and learning how to say "no." Or maybe learning how to say "yes"! So, what do you want to ask for?

So, I'm going to ask you to ask for three things. And then there's a fourth one I want you to ask for and it's based on Muhammad Ali's quote when he said, *"If your dream doesn't scare you, your dream is not big enough."*

If we're going to be thinking anyway, why not think big? If you're going to be praying anyway, why not pray big? If you're going to be asking anyway, why not ask big? If you're going to be living anyway, why not live big?

You know, we live small lives. And even in prayer, we don't hold ... When it says "whatever," it means unlimited good is available to us! And we're still a bit afraid to ask.

And so, ask for three things that come to your mind. And then intentionally ask for something big that scares you a bit. And not just anything, but something you want. Something you desire that you haven't allowed yourself to realize, *"That's possible for me!"*

You know the one that scares me a bit that's my big one? One is raising \$2.5 million to build that indoor fellowship space. [Congregants laugh] But I've got faith, and I am holding in prayer not just the raising of that money, but also hiring the right contractor; that the city permits process goes well; that the entire building schedule goes even better than we thought; and we're all in there having a coffee together and enjoying some fellowship together.

You know, for us to expand the good in our lives, guess what? We need to expand our faith! We need to step out; we need to dream big. And we need to believe in these possibilities and not let those possibilities scare us.

A few minutes before service started, the townspeople were sitting in their pews talking. Suddenly Satan appeared in front of the church, and everybody started screaming and running for the exit, trampling each other, frantic to get out. Soon there was only one person left in the church, who was an elderly man who sat there calmly, without even moving, almost seemingly oblivious to the fact that the devil was in the church right in front of him.

So Satan walked up to the old man and said, "Don't you know who I am?"

And the man said, "Sure do."

He said, "Aren't you afraid of me?"

He said, "Sure ain't."

He said, "Do you realize I could kill you with a word?"

"I don't doubt it for a second."

"Do you know that I could cause you profound agony for all eternity?"

"Yep."

"And you're still not afraid?"

"Nope."

And Satan's getting really ticked off. He said, "Well, you know, why aren't you afraid of me?"

And then the man calmly said, "I've been married to your sister for 48 years." [Congregants laugh]

Good. Thank you. All right. [Laughs]

So, every one of us is here to bear good fruit in all of its various forms. But number one is to live a God-centered life and to deepen our faith, and bring forth the goodness in us and the glory of God right here and now.

And the way to do that is to remain connected: to seek God with all of our heart; to believe that power is within us; and to abide in love. And to cut out and to prune the things that are not working in our lives ... and the things that are working that we could tweak to make even better to bring forth more good. And finally, ask for what you want. There's unlimited, abundant good out there! The question is: What are you willing to ask for? Because the only way to bring forth more good is: you have to be willing to ask.

To bear good fruit is our purpose, and it is also the great message in the Parable of the Vine.

God bless you all. [Congregants applaud]

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