

Message

The Gardener's Work

As followers of Jesus one of the toughest things we have to deal with is hardship or suffering. Many Christians have this idea that when we decide to become a Christian, our life from that point on will be painless and free from trouble. But we soon realize that that is not the case. We are not immune from sickness, grief, hardships. In my 48 years of ministry as a pastor, I have heard believers struggle when they go through a time of difficulty. I often hear the question, "Why is God punishing me?" "What did I do to deserve this?" I don't pretend to know the answer to those hard questions. Sometimes there is no reason. We live in a fallen and broken world and bad things happen. Bad things happen to good people. But **there are times when God is using a difficult and painful time for a purpose.** We don't always discern that at the time of the hardship. It is not until later that we can look back and see that God was in it and using it for His purpose of shaping our character into the likeness of Jesus. Discovering that there may be a purpose or reason for the suffering, does not make it enjoyable or less painful. We must maintain our faith through the trial until God brings us through.

We have been looking at this passage from John 15. It is an important teaching passage for Disciples. Jesus is teaching his followers **how we are to live as His followers in this world.** The chapter begins with this word picture or parable that Jesus teaches about a Vine, branches and the Gardener. **He is the Vine.** The purpose of the vine is to produce branches that will produce fruit for the benefit of the Gardener. The vine carries life-giving sap to the branches so they can do what they are supposed to do. **We are the Branches.** The lesson in the parable is very clear. **Branches exist for the purpose of producing fruit.** The fruit that we are to produce is fruit of **right living – obedience**, a life that conforms to the will of God. The fruit of our lives is a **character that is transformed** into the likeness of Jesus. **Fruit of the Spirit – Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control.** The Fruit we are to be producing is the **fruit of new believers.** And **the Father is the Vinedresser, or Gardener.** The Gardener has an important role to play in this process of Producing Fruit. The Gardener's work is not finished when He prepares the soil and plants the Vine. **In order for the Vine to produce fruit and continue to produce fruit His work never ends.** Jesus identifies two tasks of the Vinedresser – Cutting and Pruning. I want to spend our time today looking more fully at this work of the Gardener.

Cuts Off. The first work of the Farmer is to Cut Off branches that are not producing. When Dead wood remains attached to the vine, it can threaten the health of the vine. Dead wood may harbor disease. It interferes with the growth of healthy productive branches. And so the Gardener removes branches that are just taking up space. Now as we think about the vine and the branches and as we are reminded that we are the branches, this work of the Gardener may sound troubling to us. These branches are attached to the vine. At one time they had life in them, they were productive. But for some reason they have ceased to be fruitful. When branches that once were productive and fruitful cease to be fruitful they must be cut off. Who or What is Jesus talking about here? We may not be able to fully understand who or what theologically Jesus is referring to here, but we have enough information that should cause us concern. Merrill Tenney in his commentary on this passage notes that the Gardener removes the dead wood from His Church so that the health of the vine and the fruitfulness of the vine can be enhanced. **Verse 6.** Branches that are dead, that have ceased to be productive or fruitful will wither, will be picked up and thrown into the fire. The image of this work of the Gardener ought to cause us to engage in some introspection and self-examination.

The second work of the Vinedresser that Jesus refers to is **Pruning** – **"every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."** This work of pruning is for the purpose of making the branch more fruitful, or more productive. The word **"cuts off"** and the word that is translated **"pruning"** come from the same root word in the Greek language. The first word means to be cut off to be carried off, or thrown into the fire as Jesus says in verse 6. The second word also includes the idea of "cutting off", but it now includes the idea of "Cleansing". In our English translation, in verse 2 Jesus uses the word **Pruning**, and then in verse 3 he uses the word **clean**. It appears that Jesus is referring to the same action. So what Jesus says in verse 3 about being clean helps us to understand what he means by the word Pruning. Let me read the 2 verse together - **²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he**

prunes² so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

When a fruitful branch is left unattended, it will continue to send out long stems that will not produce fruit. They look nice, but the part of the branch that produces the most fruit is the part that is closest to the vine. When these long shoots are allowed to grow, sap from the vine that would normally go to the part of the branch that is most productive is diverted to these long stems. So if you want the branch to be productive in the next season, this “new growth” must be cleaned off. If you drive past vineyards or orchards around here, you will notice that at the end of the season, after the fruit is harvested, the gardeners will cut the vine back – way back. Then in spring when the vine begins to “come alive” again, it will produce new growth, close to the vine and will produce more fruit.

So what is the application for us. How does the Vinedresser – the Father – prunes our lives so that we will be more productive. If God does not cut off the long, spindly growth that follows the time of harvest, the branch may feel that it has the capacity to produce fruit on its own. So the Vinedresser must break that self-sufficient attitude by cutting us back. **1. “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”** Jesus said that His teaching has been a source of cleansing or pruning for His followers. As Jesus has taught His followers, He has given them instructions for the way they are to live their lives. His teaching through His sermons, through his example, has begun this process of cleansing their lives from sin, and guiding them to the way God wants them to live. Just one quick example – I think of the teaching that Jesus presented in John 13 – washing their feet. The disciples previous way of thinking was to struggle for power and position. But Jesus through his words and example teaches them what is more important – sacrificial service to others. I’ve said this before, but Jesus’ words are not just to be words that we admire, but words that show us how to live. If we hear His words, we must put his words into practice.

There is another form of pruning that I want to mention. It is referred to in **Hebrews 12:4-11. READ.** The writer refers to the Discipline that God carries out in the lives of His children. He says, **“Endure Hardship as Discipline.”** I believe that the Hardship that the writer is referring to is another form of Pruning that the Gardener engages in so that our lives will be more fruitful. It is the desire of the Father that our lives will be Fruitful – **producing holiness, righteousness and peace.** When our lives fail to produce the fruit that God desires, He may allow us to go through a time of hardship, in order to break out of our lives attitudes, behavior, that prevent us from being fruitful. Sometimes as we are going through our lives, it may be that we are neglecting our soul. So we may have to go through a time of “dryness”, to make us conscious of the thirst in our soul for God. Sometimes we may be becoming more reliant on ourselves, not trusting God enough, so we may find ourselves in a situation where we must turn to God for His help. Sometimes we have developed a sinful habit that damages our witness. God may allow a time of hardship to reveal that to us, so that we will repent and abandon it.

So, the work of pruning may be happening as God allows us to go through a difficult time. I am not suggesting that every painful experience is something God sends or allows. But when we are going through a difficult time, we must consider that God is using that for our Good. Hardship and suffering does not mean that God has abandoned us or turned His back on us. The writer of Hebrews says that these times of God’s discipline are actually evidence that we are God’s beloved children.

So as we conclude today, let us be reminded that the desire of the Gardener is that we will produce fruit for Him. **Vs. 8 – “This to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.** What is growing in your life that is keeping you from being fruitful?

And let us be reminded that the Father will engage in the work of pruning, so that we will be more fruit. The pruning may not be pleasant at the time. But it will produce a harvest for Him. The season of Pruning is an act of God’s love!

Closing Prayer