

Gospel and Union with Christ — 3

(Pruning)

Outline

1. The Father is the gardener
2. The Father expects fruit
3. The Father's work as the gardener to produce fruit
 - a. cutting off false believers — judgment
 - b. pruning genuine believers — more fruit
4. Our response to the Father's pruning

1. Father is the gardener (John 15:1)

The Father is the Source, the Son is the Means, and the Holy Spirit is the Effector of our salvation. Though the roles differ, the three persons work as One in the Trinity. Jesus obeyed the Father (John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38, 7:16, 8:29, 12:49, 14:10).

After the Last Supper, Jesus begins His extended exit (John 14:31-18:1) from the Upper Room by saying, *I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me. Come now; let us leave*" (John 14:31). Having always put His ministry in the hands of the Father, Jesus does so in the last hours before His crucifixion. In other words, the Father always was and continues to be **the overseer** of Jesus' ministry, even to the end, to accomplish every detail precisely according to the Father's plan.

Immediately after saying John 14:31, Jesus begins a significant chapter in the Bible—John 15, by saying, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener"* (John 15:1). What He meant is that after His death and resurrection, Jesus becomes the instrument (**the true vine**) of Divine life through whom believers in Jesus partake of this Divine life and become fruitful. And His Father is the gardener. The Father continues to oversee the Divine plan by tending to the branches so that they will bear fruit to the glory of God (*John 15:8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples*).

2. The Father expects fruitfulness in creation, and His chosen people

God is glorified when what He created is fruitful and multiplies (Gen 1:22,28). Jesus taught parables to emphasise that God expects fruitfulness

In the parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6-9)

In the parable of the ten servants with one mina each (Luke 19:11-26) In the parable of three servants and talents (Matt 25:14-30).

In the last parable (Matt 25:14-30)—Jesus ends with this statement: Matt 25:28-30 *'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.'*²⁹ *For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*³⁰ *And throw that worthless*

servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' This parable clearly shows that God expects fruitfulness and rewards it. But He cuts off those who don't produce fruit.

Numerous OT passages refer to Israel as a vineyard: *Ps 80:8-16, Isa 5:1-7, Jer2:21, Ezek 15:1-8, 17:5-10, 19:10-14*. The vine became symbolic of Israel. But what is significant is that every time the OT uses the analogy of the vineyard, it also mentions that Israel, as God's chosen people, failed to produce fruit. Consider:

Isa 5:1-2,5 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit... ⁵ Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed.

Jesus uses this analogy to reveal God's new plan, where He is the *true vine* in the sense of being genuine compared to Israel, which did not produce fruit and was cut off (Isa 5:5). Jesus was the reality of which Israel was only the type.

3. The Father works as the gardener of the vine to produce fruitfulness (John 15:1-3,6)

John 15:1-3,6 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you...⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

As the gardener and overseer of the vine (Jesus Christ), the Father works on the branches in two ways. One is that the Father cuts off fruitless branches; the other, He prunes the fruitful branches to make them even more fruitful. The Father cuts off the lifeless and prunes the living. He cuts off the false believers and strengthens the true disciples. These are the Father's two significant works in the Body of Christ—(a) cutting off and (b) pruning.

For example, among the twelve disciples, Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was cut off because he was not clean even after three years with Jesus. While Peter, who thrice denied Jesus, repented and was strengthened to produce fruit after Pentecost. (*John 13:10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean [Peter], though not every one of you [Judas]."* ¹¹ *For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean*).

a. The Father's work of cutting off false believers — judgment

John 15:2,6 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit... ⁶ is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

Jesus expresses the same idea in the parable of the weeds Matt 13:24-30. Notice that the owner allows the weeds to grow alongside the wheat; otherwise, the natural wheat would be mistaken for the weeds and uprooted. But at the end of the age, the weeds are bundled up and burned.

So, the first work of the gardener in John 15 is **judgment**—some now and some later at the end of the age. Some false believers will fall away when facing persecution now, and some will be exposed after death and judged on the last day.

The question of whether a branch that is in union with Christ, a believer, can lose his salvation and be condemned — the answer is "No". Genuine believers cannot lose their salvation. But false believers are not saved, to begin with. There is a kind of "attachment" to Jesus, a kind of disciple, a kind of believer — that is not genuine and has no salvation. And the difference between true and false believers is that the true abides and bears fruit, whereas the false does not. I have dealt with this subject in greater detail in the previous sermon, Gospel and Union with Christ—Part 1 (Abiding).

b. The Father's work of pruning genuine believers — more fruit

John 15:2-3 While every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

In the Greek language, in which the NT was written, the word “prune” and “clean” are the same. In other words, the Father cleans every branch that was already cleansed by the “word” and was bearing fruit and would bear more fruit by pruning.

Note: The “word” here represents the whole message of Jesus. Jesus is the eternal Son of God (John 1:1–3), and became man (John 1:14). He lived without sin (John 8:46), would lay down His life for the sheep (John 3:15; 10:17), and would rise from the dead (John 10:18). In other words, the whole salvation message of the gospel. When people believe the gospel, they are cleansed and born-again, becoming branches of the true vine (Jesus).

In a natural vineyard, the vinedresser (called gardener in John 15) cuts off fruitless branches and prunes the fruitful ones. How does he prune? Snipping undesirable offshoots of a fruit-bearing branch that tends to use the vine's sap for its glory. By snipping here and there with scissors, the vinedresser allows the sap (juice) of the vine to flow fully through the branch to bear bountiful and wholesome good fruit. And there's much snipping, and I suppose it causes much pain to the fruitful branch.

When bringing up a child, a parent disciplines the child for wrong behaviour but also re-directs the vast energy of a child towards wholesome and fruitful use of time. In both cases, children suffer pain and often respond by throwing tantrums only because they lack the perspective of what the parent is doing. Eventually, they trust their parent's wisdom and supervision.

Likewise, in John 15, the Father deals with the genuine branches already bearing fruit by pruning them so that the sap in the vine will flow appropriately through the branch to bear more fruit. The sap is the Divine life of the Holy Spirit that proceeds from Father and Son; the Vine represents our Lord Jesus, and the vine dresser (gardener) is the Father.

The intensity of Divine life in our Union with Christ (as a branch of the Vine) is increased by external factors we experience in our life. And the Father controls all those external factors. There is also great internal working of the Holy Spirit (sap) in our life as He convicts us, enlightens us etc. But here, the focus is on external factors profoundly affecting our experience of the sap and the vine.

2 Cor 1:8-9 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Paul's example above is severe, yet believers today in India, China and the Middle East are persecuted for their faith and experience similar conditions. Nevertheless, all Christians will face external provocation, which the Father ordains and controls so that we might rely on God, not ourselves.

The general principle of pruning is to move us to depend on God so that we bear more fruit. It includes discipline when we have sinful attitudes and behaviour so we bear the fruit of holiness.

Heb 12:5-11 says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” ⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their fathers? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined

us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good so that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those trained by it.

4. Our response to the Father's pruning

All believers go through pruning. Whenever I faced it, I found great comfort in: *Isa 30:15 "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.*

Firstly, I examine whether my heart is right with God and others. I check for unconfessed sin, wrong attitudes, careless speech, and haste in me. After clearing my heart, I rest in the fact that I am a believer in Jesus, and God has saved me. I don't have to make any hasty decisions. Instead, I quietly trust Him and wait upon Him, continue my daily devotions and be diligent in my work. Invariably, the pruning season passes, and I grow deeper in my walk with God.

Sometimes, I don't even know why I am having a hard time. Then I turn to:

Isa 50:10. "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God".

Ps 105:17-19 And he sent a man before them — Joseph sold as a slave. ¹⁸ They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, ¹⁹ till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the Lord proved him true.

Jer 12:5 "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?

I believe God is training us for higher purposes when He prunes us. He teaches us to compete with horses! God prepared Joseph and David for a high purpose. He will train us for the last days.