

Abide in the Vine (John 15:1-8)
Matthew Williams

Few activities are more rejuvenating for my body and soul than gardening. There's something deeply satisfying about cultivating living things for beauty and sustenance. The dirt, sweat, and mosquitos don't bother me. If anything, the messier the process the more rewarding the outcome, unless, of course, a fruitful outcome proves maddeningly elusive. Such has been the hedge between the north side of our home and the south side of our neighbors for 9 years and counting.

The first row of *Elaeagnus* thrived for a while, until voles ate all the root balls and the 6' tall shrubs literally fell over. Round two consisted of a beautiful line of blue prince and princess hollies that were supposed to produce abundant clusters of red berries. The voles left them alone, but a combination of an underground spring saturating their roots and a fungus of some sort caused them to bite the dust after several years. My latest attempt involves three native inkberry hollies who thrive in wet soil. After 2 years, I'm seeing early signs of fruitfulness. Time will tell.

Few experiences are more frustrating for a gardener than sinking money into plants that start off well enough, but never grow. Why won't they bear fruit? It's mystifying. We can have the exact same experience as Christians. You start off well enough. Maybe you have a spiritual moment or season where you're amazed by the mercy of God in the gospel and are excited to follow Jesus. But as the months pass or the years wear by, you don't grow. There's little to no spiritual fruit. No passion for the glory of God. No affection for the Savior. Scant evidence in your life of being any different than the world around you.

So what gives? What's the problem? A lack of fruitfulness may be inexplicable for a gardener. But it is not inexplicable for a Christian. The path of spiritual fruitfulness and life is not a mystery. It is known. It is clear. Because Christ himself has made it known and clear. It's found in a word Jesus uses 7 times in 8 verses. He tells us to abide in him. Abiding in Christ, a life of wholehearted

dependence on and communion with Jesus, is the only path of spiritual fruitfulness and life.

John 15:1-8 is part of a larger body of instruction from Jesus known as the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is about to die for the sin of the world. He won't physically remain with his disciples much longer. So he gives them and us careful guidance for how we should live until the day he returns. In a broken world filled with trouble within and without, how do we grow in a spiritual sense? There are two things we need to understand and the first is this.

1) SPIRITUAL FRUITFULNESS IS OF SUPREME IMPORTANCE TO GOD (vv. 1-2)

There are seven "I am" sayings in John's gospel. Each one of them tell us something critical about the identity of Jesus. The seventh and final saying is found in v. 1. "I am the true vine," Jesus says.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord repeatedly refers to his people Israel as the vine of his planting. The psalm Serena read this morning, Psalm 80, says in v. 8, "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." Like a master gardener, the Lord transplanted Israel out of the land of slavery and death, nourished her with the water of his word, and gave her a rich place to grow and bear the fruit of godliness as his people, in his place, under his rule.

But she didn't do what she was supposed to do. She didn't submit to God's authority. She became a wild vine. And she didn't produce the fruit of godliness. She yielded wild grapes. Isaiah 5:7 says, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts in the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry."

The consequences of Israel's rebellion were incredibly painful. Psalm 80 laments as much. Yet it ends with an expression of confident hope in "the son of man." Again in Psalm 80:17-18 we read, "But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!"



Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!"

The "son of man" in Psalm 80 is Jesus, the Son of God. He took on human flesh that he might do for Israel what she repeatedly failed to do, walk in perfect obedience to God the Father. In so doing, he became the true Israel, the faithful Son, who freely gives the spiritual blessings and rewards he earned to all who call upon his name, starting with a new heart, a new spirit that perseveres in the obedience of faith.

And if you call upon his name, crying out to him to make you right with God, Jesus doesn't hand you a get-out-of-hell free card and move on. The Holy Spirit binds you to Christ such that you are organically united to him as a branch is united to the stem or vine that gives it life. In verse 5 Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches."

Picture the branches of a grape vine. At a basic level, what do branches do? They bear fruit. It's why Jewish farmers in Palestine plant them in the first place. As Jesus says in v. 1, "My Father is the vinedresser." So what's God the Father looking for as he tends and cares for all the branches coming off the vine? He's looking for fruit! What kind of fruit? The fruit he desired from Israel all along – a life devoted to loving, serving, obeying, and delighting in him. Our existence as human beings is not an accident. God didn't create you and then say, "Hmm...now what?" No. Genesis 1:28 says, "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...'"

Yes, one of the most important ways we obey that command is by raising up godly offspring. But don't miss the bigger picture. The Lord's telling the first man and woman that he has a divinely intended, God-glorifying, purpose for their life. It's what the Bible means when it talks about living for God's glory. We live for God's glory by embracing his purpose for our life instead of our own.

And what did God do when Adam and Eve sinned and ditched living for God's purpose for their own? The Creator became our Redeemer. Why did Jesus

come to live for us, die for us, rise from the grave, and pour the Spirit into our hearts, restoring us to himself? Look down at v. 16: "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit..." God's ultimate purpose for your life is far greater than getting you to heaven. As agricultural fruitfulness is the vinedresser's goal so spiritual fruitfulness is the Father's goal. So he does two things.

First (v. 2), "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away..." Friend, if you call yourself a Christian but the way you live does not reflect a heart devoted to loving, serving, obeying, and delighting in Jesus as your Savior King, God isn't fooled, and you shouldn't be either. Matt 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." As D.A. Carson says, "There are no true Christians without some measure of fruit."

But I thought I was bearing fruit, pastor! I'm growing in loving Jesus. I'm learning to submit to his authority in different areas of my life. I'm discovering the joy of being used by him to love and serve people around me. So why are all these bad things happening to me? Why am I suffering? Why do I feel like as soon as I try to follow Jesus in a deeper way, my life gets harder, not easier? You would think that if I'm doing what God wants me to do, he would reward me, not punish me. What gives?

It's the second thing the vinedresser does. See verse 2: "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." James 1:2-4, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Hebrews 12:11, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Christian, the idea that if we do good for God, we will get good from God is wrong on two levels. It reflects a legalistic spirit that thinks we are capable of meriting good things from him. And it displays an arrogance that assumes we

know what is good, better than God does. What do we think is good for us? A comfortable life. What does God say is good? Finding joy in Jesus as we become more like Jesus through the trials and suffering of this life that prepare us for life with Jesus as his blood-bought people to the praise of his glorious grace.

Pruning is painful. Plants typically don't look very good right after they've been pruned. In some cases, they look practically dead. My knockout roses in early February are a case in point. So why do I prune them? For the same reason God prunes us. Because if I don't, they will yield a handful of flowers on gangly, unstable, stems. But if I do, they will yield an abundance of gorgeous blooms on strong branches capable of withstanding the wind and rain for years to come. I prune that plant because I love that plant and am committed to its long-term health and growth. The Lord has the same heart toward us as his people.

There are only two kinds of people in the world: branches the Lord takes away in righteous judgment and branches the Lord prunes in redemptive discipline. No one gets ignored. The vinedresser is engaged and involved with every person. So don't ignore the absence of spiritual fruit. Cry out to Jesus to save you. And do not despise the Lord's pruning activity. Trust him to make you more like him, even through suffering. Why? Because spiritual fruitfulness is of supreme importance to God.

2) ABIDING IN CHRIST IS THE KEY TO SPIRITUAL FRUITFULNESS (vv. 3-7)

Besides ignoring the necessity of spiritual fruit in our lives, the other great danger is mistaking the fruit of our salvation for the foundation of our salvation. Good works are necessary for your salvation, Christian, but they are not the ground of your salvation. They are not the reason you receive the smile of God's favor. Cleansing from the guilt of sin and welcome into God's presence as his beloved children is not something we achieve for ourselves. It's something God accomplishes for us.

Jesus makes this crystal clear in v. 3. "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." What word is that? The decisive declaration Jesus spoke over his disciples, save Judas Iscariot, back in John 13:10, "And you are clean..." Clean from the guilt of your sin through faith in me and the atoning sacrifice I'm about to make on your behalf. That, Jesus says, has already happened. It's not something they're waiting to experience on the heels of sufficient fruit-bearing. It's a gift they have already received through faith in Jesus.

Friend, Jesus has spoken the same word over you if you have placed your confidence for deliverance from the death you deserve on account of your sin wholly in him. And his word always prevails. It will prevail over our doubts. It will prevail over our fears. It will prevail over the accusations of the evil one. It's not a divine desire that you will become clean. It's a definitive declaration that you are completely and eternally forgiven from the mouth of the God himself. Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

And now, because you are clean, here's what you must do. Here's how the Father's purpose to bring a harvest of spiritual fruit to pass in your life will be accomplished. V. 4, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." That's the key to spiritual fruitfulness. To abide in Christ is a day by day, moment by moment decision to draw our spiritual nourishment and life from him. It's a picture of personal communion, a relationship of continual dependence.

As J.C. Ryle says, "To abide in Christ means to keep up a habit of constant close communion with Him – to be always leaning on Him, resting on Him, pouring out our hearts to Him, and using Him as our Fountain of life and strength, as our chief Companion and best Friend."

Imagine I took one of my pepper plants, chopped off one of the branches, and set it on the ground next to the plant waiting for it to bear fruit. Would that work? Of course not. Everything that branch needs to produce peppers comes



to it through its connection with the main stem, the main vine. The stem can be close to the vine. It can be aware of the vine. It can sing songs and listen to sermons about the vine. But if it lacks vital connection to the vine, it can't produce anything and will eventually shrivel and die.

Christian, that's what our relationship with Jesus is like. Bearing spiritual fruit requires more than knowing the right things about Jesus: what he's done for you, how you should live as a result, etc. It requires continuing to relate in the right way to Jesus: loving him, trusting him, hoping in him, and waiting for him.

Abiding in Christ in the workplace means looking to him for the wisdom you need to do your job instead of leaning on your own understanding. Abiding in Christ at home means finding your joy in him instead of in how the kids are behaving. Abiding in Christ when we're anxious means looking to him for comfort instead of trying to drown our sorrows with food, sex, movies, or drugs. Abiding in Christ when we're sinned against means clinging to him as the one who vindicates our cause instead of avenging ourselves. Abiding in Christ when we sin against others means believing his blood is sufficient to cover our sin instead of trying to cover it ourselves through acts of penance.

In short, abiding in Christ means living a gospel-centered life where the fullness of who Jesus is and the spiritual riches that are ours because of his saving work shape, inform, and direct what you think, feel, and do in every situation. When we're abiding in him and he's abiding in us, then and only then will we bear much fruit.

I have struggled mightily over the years to be patient with my boys. Many times, I've waded into a parenting opportunity and had to walk out of the room because anger was boiling on the inside. By God's grace, I think I've grown a little bit in patience in recent months. At least that's what one of my boys said. And you know how it's happened? It's not because I focused on being more patient. It's happened as the Spirit has helped me abide in Christ. It's happened as I've read God's Word, poured out my tired soul to him in prayer, and seen again and again just how exceedingly patient Jesus is with

me. And as my awareness and delight in God's patience has grown, so has my patience toward the boys.

Here's another example. Josh Kruger recently shared this testimony with me and gave me permission to read it.

"For many years I loved Karin very ineffectively. This was because loving her was a duty for me. Husbands, lead your wives. Husbands, lay down your lives for your wives. Those were the things I heard at conferences. Those were the things I read in books and in the Bible, over many years, and it became a heavy burden because I felt utterly unable to do it. Then, maybe 6 or 7-ish years ago, something changed. God started revealing more of who He is to me and I started loving Jesus more. And one thing that happened as a result was that suddenly, and unexpectedly, leading and loving Karin did a 180 from duty to delight. Not that I do it close to perfect now, but suddenly the heaviness was gone; laying down my life for her became a joy."

Josh didn't produce the spiritual fruit of loving Karin by focusing on loving Karin. He grew in godliness when he focused on loving God, abiding in Jesus.

When we abide in Christ, we bear spiritual fruit. So how do we do it? It can sound so mysterious, so elusive. That's not the case at all! Abiding in Christ is exceedingly practical. Look at v. 7: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Notice how Jesus connects three things: abiding in Christ, God's Word abiding in us, and a lifestyle of fruitful prayer!

Why are those things connected? Because we abide in him (and he in us!) through the power of his Word. If you want to abide in Christ, don't wait for it to happen. Open your Bible and begin reading. Through reading, meditating, studying, and memorizing his Word, we come more fully under Jesus' influence in our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

And as God speaks to us through his Word, we learn how to speak to him, to pour out our hearts to him in prayer. We learn how to say, "Help, God" more



quickly and faithfully. Few activities rival prayer as an expression of dependence on Jesus, which is the essence of what it means to abide in him.

If we rarely commune with God through meditation on his word and prayer, is it any wonder we don't seem to produce spiritual fruit? The problem isn't ultimately that we're not reading our Bible or praying. The problem is that by neglecting those disciplines we've stopped abiding in Christ and expressing our dependence on him. We've rejected the means of grace he has ordained to nourish our souls and impart his life into our hearts.

Godliness isn't a function of "giftedness." It's not a special power reserved for the few, the proud, and the pastors. It's the result of abiding in Christ. Apart from him (v. 5), we can do nothing. Bearing spiritual fruit is impossible. But if we choose to abide in him, the Lord makes a precious promise. We will bear "much" fruit!

Did you come to Jesus late in life? God knows. Did you show up with piles of baggage from all the foolish things you've done? God knows. When you spend time around other Christians are you tempted to think, "I'll never be like that man or that woman. I'm too far behind." God knows. Yet despite all he knows, his promise remains. If you abide in me, you will bear much fruit!

So don't look to yourself and despair. Look to Christ and rejoice! Whether you've been a Christian 5 days or 50 years, what determines whether you will bear the fruit of godliness in your life today is whether you are willing to abide in Christ today, whether you will depend on him, commune with him, listen to him, pour out your heart to him, and lean on him.

Do you feel weak in yourself? Good. You're seeing yourself for who you really are. We're all weak, pastors included. But we have a mighty Savior who pours out infinite stores of grace to grow and change as we abide in him. Growing in godliness isn't about cleaning our life up. It's about abiding in Jesus and watching him accomplish in us and through us what we could never do on our own.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual fruitfulness is of supreme importance to God and the abiding in Christ is the key to spiritual fruitfulness. What's that mean for you and me? That abiding in Christ is a matter of supreme importance for us. Is it to you, friend? Do you arise in the morning convinced that the great business of the day is to get as many things done as possible in as little time as possible to please as many people as possible while earning as much money as possible? Or is your governing ambition at once simpler and yet of infinitely greater value.

Your chief aim today, tomorrow, and every day of your life is to abide in Christ, to trust in Jesus, depend on Jesus, and find your joy in him. Self-sufficiency is a direct assault on the glory of our Creator. It's the age-old temptation to say, "I don't need God. I don't want to depend on God. I want to be God! I would rather be a God unto myself." God will have none of it, friends. He is too jealous for his glory. He is too committed to your good. It's why judgment and destruction come to those who refuse to abide in Christ in v. 6.

Take care that you glorify God by bearing the fruit of godliness in your life, not by striving to change your behavior but by laboring to abide in Christ. Then and only then will you bear fruit that lasts and experience the assurance of salvation the Lord promised his disciples in v. 8. "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." May that be our consistent experience, brothers and sisters, not because we've perfected the Christian life, but because we persevere in abiding in Christ.