

# This is Us

## 3. Fruitful

May 16, 2021

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*Text: John 15:16*

Anybody remember the song “We are Family”? It was the theme song for the Pittsburgh Pirates the last time they won the World Series -- which was in 1979. And that’s the era in which the TV show “This is Us” is set. That show is about a family living in Pittsburgh in the ‘70s and ‘80s. This message series is titled “This is Us,” and it’s about a church family in Pittsburgh called Crossroads Church. We are the family of God on the mission of God.

In John 13-17, Jesus speaks to his disciples one last time before he is crucified. The truths he highlighted became the Church’s family values. In John 13, Jesus taught us to serve one another and the world. That’s what we do at Crossroads Church. Last week, in John 14, we saw that we are to encourage each other to obey Jesus because we love him. And today we’re going to look at John 15. So, let’s stand to honor the reading of the Lord’s word.

**John 15:1-8** *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

So, if I were to ask you what it means to be a Christian, what would you say? Some might say that it means to believe in God and to be a moral person. Others think it means having an emotional moment or praying a certain prayer after hearing the message that “Jesus loves you and died for your sin. Ask his forgiveness and then you will be saved; you will escape hell and spend eternity in heaven.” I’ve offered invitations something like that. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people over the years have prayed at the ends of services to receive Christ. But I stopped doing that. It’s not that it’s wrong or false. I’m not saying that no one has become a Christ-follower that way; many have, I know. And God uses all kinds of methods to bring people to Jesus. I’m just saying that praying the prayer doesn’t communicate the essence of what it means to start following Jesus.

When I was in college, I remember being bothered by the fact that in the New Testament the disciples never heard the Gospel the way I presented it, and they never prayed to receive Christ like we do today. So, when did they become Christians? Of course, Jesus had not yet died on the cross and risen again when they first started following him. So, I thought that they were special cases. They lived between the Old Testament religion and the new covenant through Jesus. So, the way they came into a relationship with God worked different for them than everyone else. Or did it?

The more I studied the scriptures and watched God work in people's lives, I saw that those first disciples came to faith in Jesus the same way we do today -- by making him Lord of their lives. They said "yes" to whatever Jesus asked them to do, starting with small steps and moving on to bigger ones. They showed their faith in him continuing to follow him, absorbing what he taught. One thing led to another, and a few years later they were preaching the Gospel and leading an expanding movement of followers. They became so committed to him that all but one of them died as martyrs for their conviction.

The New Testament shows that a person can be vitally connected to Jesus without praying the formula prayer. But in John 15, Jesus says no one can be his follower without staying deeply connected to him and drawing their life from him. John 15 tells us that **Jesus followers are bonded to him as a branch to the vine.**

In **John 15:1** Jesus says, *I am the true vine.* The disciples would have been startled to hear that. They grew up hearing that the nation of Israel was the vine. The Old Testament repeatedly uses the grapevine as a symbol for the people of Israel. In fact, in the temple, there was a massive vine, made of solid gold, towering 90 feet high. [ Photo shown on the screens. ] It was a symbol of the nation. The people of Israel are called a vine in **Psalm 80:8-11** *You [God] brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River.* God's people are called a vine planted by the Lord, and he intended that they would bear fruit for his pleasure. But it didn't work out that way. Even though Israel was planted by the Lord, they didn't stay faithful to him. They didn't produce the fruit that God wanted.

In **Isaiah 5:3-4** God says *"And now, you inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes, did it produce worthless ones?"* God was looking for fruit from Israel, and he didn't get it. So, Jesus became the true vine, and we are the branches.

So, Jesus says that God expects us to bear **fruit**. **Verses 1-2** *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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. V. 8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.* Fruit is the evidence that we are his disciples. What does he mean by fruit? What is he expecting of us?

He's talking about at least two types of fruit:

**1. The fruit of Love.** A few verses later he says – [in] **John 15:12** *“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.* And **Galatians 5:22** says, *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...”* These are identifying markers of one who is bonded to Christ like a branch to the vine. When we are bonded to Jesus who loved us enough to die for us, then how can we not love other people? God IS LOVE – so when we know him, then how can we not love other people?

Another kind of fruit that we can expect in one who is bonded to Jesus is

**New followers of Jesus.** When we love others, we want to help others find their way back to God. **John 4:35-36** *Behold, I tell you, raise your eyes and observe the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life* (New American Standard Bible.)

Last week, Linda flew to Texas to visit her father and stepmom for the first time since before the pandemic. I was anxious for her to return home Monday night. But after she got to the gate, they said her flight was delayed. First 45 minutes. Then an hour and a half. Then, several hours late, they boarded the plane -- just in time for thunderstorms to arrive. Severe ones. They sat on the plane for a couple of hours waiting for them to pass. Linda was texting me updates. But the storms didn't pass. Finally, they returned to the terminal, and the flight was canceled. It was nearing midnight when Linda called me from a long line of stranded passengers scrambling for a way back to Pittsburgh. I could hear the fatigue and discouragement in her voice. I got on the computer and went to work trying to get her a flight back. I tried three times booking for the next day, but each time I entered my credit card info, the flight was snatched by someone else and disappeared. Finally, I got her a seat. But it got her back quite late. I knew she was desperate to get home, so I went looking for an earlier flight. I found one and booked that one, too. I was spending hundreds of dollars more than if we waited for the airline, but that was okay because Linda was desperate to get home, and I wanted her back home.

So, the next day, she got on the plane to come home – and thunderstorms came up out of nowhere, and the terminal shut down again. But this time, they waited it out, and she finally got home. I was thinking about how determined I was to get Linda home. It was 1:30am, but I wasn't going to go to bed until I knew she had a way back. I was in constant touch with her to make sure she was okay until she got home. That's because I love her. Shouldn't I feel some urgency about people who need to find their way back home to God? Jesus said he came to seek and save the lost. When we are deeply bonded to him, we'll share his mission. That's fruit.

When we read a passage like this, it's natural to ask ourselves, do I have fruit? Has love been growing in me over the past year? Does it matter to me that there are thousands of people within in a short drive from this room that do not have life and will face eternity apart from Christ? If we don't see enough fruit in our lives, what are we supposed to do? The answer is not to get busy and work hard. Jesus says something entirely different. He says, “remain in me.”

**John 15:4-5** *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. <sup>5</sup> "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.* I've got a branch here. I heard Francis Chan use this illustration: If we all worked together really hard, could we make this branch bear fruit? No! Maybe we could tape an apple or something on here but not really. The only way this branch bears fruit is if it's attached to the vine. Jesus guarantees us that we can't bear [fruit] unless we abide in him. If we do remain in him, he guarantees that we will have FRUIT. **So how do we remain in Christ?**

Notice that Jesus doesn't say we need to remain in church. He says to remain *in him*. If we think of remaining in Jesus as sitting quietly alone meditating in prayer, we won't do *remaining*. Remaining in Jesus, or staying "bonded" to him, means I don't do anything without him. One of the most transformational realizations I have had in the last ten years is to do each day *with* Jesus, not *for* him.

Doing things FOR Jesus means he is at a distance watching. But Jesus said he will be WITH us always. That's why we can remain in him – unless we wander off. Remaining in Jesus means depending on him. So, as I go through each day, I try to be aware that Jesus is celebrating with me when things are going well. And when I have a problem, I don't wonder, "What am I going to do about this?" I think, "Jesus, how are we going to handle this? What do you want to do?" Of course, remaining in Jesus also involves spending time with him in personal worship and with others in public worship. It's connecting with his people in community. These deepen the bond we have with him.

Jesus gives us a heads-up about remaining in him like a branch to the vine -- **we will be "pruned."** **John 15:2** *"every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."* Being pruned doesn't mean that we get wrinkled like a prune.

Pruning is a technique vineyard-keepers use to increase the yield of their vines. [ Photo of a pruned tree shown on the screens. ] During the winter season, they cut back the branches of what looks like a healthy plant. It might seem cruel and destructive, but actually, it allows the energy of the vine to flow and produce more fruit. God will do the same thing to his people. We would expect him to operate and cut away sin from our lives. But pruning is not just about eliminating disobedience. The Lord will cut away parts of our lives that might even look good in order that we become even more fruitful. A tree that has never been pruned looks good. It has a lot of leaves, a lot of branches growing. The problem is it doesn't produce enough fruit. Unless the dead wood is cut away, fruit will not grow. So, the Lord might cut away even good things.

For example, could it be that God is using COVID to prune us as believers and as a church? COVID was a forced pruning of our schedules. And I've heard many say that once the shutdown happened, they actually enjoyed a slower pace. They connected more with their family and each other. Now, the challenge is going to be, will I fill up my life again with all those things? We cannot remain in Him if a thousand other things are distracting us.

Jesus said the Lord prunes *every branch...* British preacher Charles Spurgeon said, "All fruit-bearing saints must feel the knife." Jesus says our only options are to be discarded or pruned! When we are pruned, we become more reliant on the Vine for our life and strength. The process of pruning cuts away everything else so we can love Him and trust Him fully. What sucks life from my relationship with Jesus? What loosens my connection with Jesus?

People grow and prevail not because they believe more sincerely, but because they bond more deeply. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us right now about how he might be pruning us to remain in Jesus.