

Session 3 Cultivating True Greatness and Spiritual Success (Jn. 15:1-3)

“Let me drink from the river of Your pleasures as I delight in Your beauty.” (Ps. 36:8; 37:4)

I. THE THEME OF JOHN 15—CULTIVATING UNION WITH GOD WITH FRUITFULNESS

- A. **Review:** Jesus spoke of some called “great” and some called “least” in the kingdom. God will call their life choices “great” because they loved and obeyed Him. This greatness is attained without regard for outward achievements and impact. It is based on the size of one’s heart response to God. God is far more committed to our fruitfulness or true greatness and spiritual success than we are.
- ¹⁹Whoever breaks [consistently] one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does [consistently] and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:19)*
- ⁴¹...one star differs from another star in glory. ⁴²So also is the resurrection...(1 Cor. 15:41-42)*
- B. Jesus commanded the disciples not to let trouble dominate their hearts (Jn. 14:1). We do this by replacing negative thoughts with the truths Jesus taught—by speaking these truths over our lives.
- ¹“Let not your heart be troubled...believe in Me...²⁷My peace I give to you...” (Jn. 14:1, 27)*
- C. John 15 is a highpoint in the Scripture in terms of our relationship with God. Jesus revealed Himself as the true vine (source), and His people as His branches (the expression or vessels of His presence). Abiding in Him results in the miracle of bearing fruit that “remains”—or that God esteems forever. God esteeming our fruitfulness is what defines our success and/or being great in His sight.
- ¹“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser...²every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me [talks to Me]...bears much fruit...¹⁶I chose you... that your fruit should remain.” (Jn. 15:1-5, 16)*
- D. **Bears fruit:** We bear fruit inwardly in our character and outwardly in our ministry and service to others—godly character (Gal. 5:22) and ministry and service (Jn. 4:36; Rom. 1:13; Phil. 1:22). Fruitfulness is about *possessing* love, humility, and purity, and then *inspiring* it in others.
- E. The Father ordained that His people even in their weakness be the primary vessels of His presence that He uses to touch others. Jesus referred to us as “branches” or vessels of His “Zoé life” being released on earth. It is a glorious reality that His supernatural life flows in and through us by the Spirit. Our life becomes epic as we press into a lifelong journey, knowing that He sees, is moved by, and remembers all that we do in our quest to abide or commune with Him in obedient love.
- F. **Abides in Me:** Jesus calls us to be fruitful through abiding in Him. The Christian life is an ongoing dialogue with a Person. He has much to say, but allows us to set the pace of the conversation.
- G. Jesus began by emphasizing two important truths necessary to cultivate an abiding life that bears fruit. First, that Jesus is the true vine; second, that the Father is the vinedresser who prunes.
- ¹“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser...” (Jn. 15:1)*

II. TRUTH #1: JESUS IS THE TRUE VINE (JN. 15:1)

- A. ***I am the true vine***: Jesus is the vine or the *source* and *model* of how to relate to God and bear fruit. Jesus in us is compared to the sap in a vine; He is the source of divine life and leadership in our life.
- B. ***Source***: Jesus is “the” true vine—the only source that satisfies the human heart and empowers us to bear fruit that remains. The only vine that satisfies us is not wealth, prominence, entertainment, etc. It takes more than wise words, a good personality, strong gifting, or excellent leadership skills to release grace to inspire others to love God. It requires the Spirit’s work. The most dedicated parent does not in themselves have the ability to impart spiritual life to motivate their children to love God.
1. We bear fruit as our words and deeds move people spiritually to embrace love, purity, and humility more in responding to love and obey God. This takes the presence of the Spirit.
 2. What is “the” vine that you rely on most to satisfy your heart and impact those you love?
 3. Some only see and know Jesus as savior, healer, or provider, but not as “the true vine.”
- C. ***Model***: Jesus is the model of how a believer is to relate to God. In John 14, He described how He related to the Father in His humanity, by abiding in Him (Jn. 14:10-11, 20). In John 15, Jesus called them to abide in Him or relate to Him in the way He as a Man related to the Father by the Spirit. We must read both chapters together. Jesus is fully God, and so He has a unique relationship with the Father, but there are significant similarities in how we are to relate to the Father.

III. TRUTH #2: THE FATHER IS THE VINEDRESSER WHO PRUNES FRUITFUL LIVES

- A. ***My Father is the vinedresser***: We must see the Father as a zealous vinedresser, or chief gardener, who oversees the health and fruitfulness of His vineyard. He takes the initiative to intervene to train, provide, heal, protect, and direct every fruitful believer to bring them to greater fruitfulness.
- ¹“...***My Father is the vinedresser...²Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*** ³***You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.***” (Jn. 15:1-3)
- B. ***He prunes***: A gardener cuts branches off the vine so it will be more lush with life. Each year after the harvest, in early spring, the vinedresser prunes (cuts away) over 80% of the vine from the previous year’s growth. If it is not cut off, the vine will grow as a wild vine without producing many grapes. Pruning removes branches or previous growth that was caused by the sap or the life in the vine. The pruned branches are those resulting from the good life in the vine.
- C. The purpose of the Father’s *pruning* is to *remove distraction* from an obedient believer (15:3), whereas the Father’s *discipline* is to *remove sin* from a compromising believer (Heb. 12:5-11). They are different. He does not prune sin, but prunes distractions that hinder our growth in love.
- D. ***Every branch***: The Father wants every fruit-bearing believer to bear more fruit. His commitment to prune us is a *glorious promise*, not a *dreadful warning*. He intervenes to bring forth more love, and purity in our life and ministry. The Lord is more committed to our greatness than we are (Mt. 5:19).

- E. Blessing in one season can create added distraction in the next season. Too much activity often diminishes our abiding in Christ. Fruitfulness often leads to growth that results in more demands on our lives, along with more responsibilities, which causes people to have greater expectations of us.
- F. Practically, the pruned branches speak of removing some of the increased activities, demands, responsibilities, and expectations that came with increased fruitfulness in the previous season. It may result in a decrease of money, ministry, influence, popularity, position, power, etc.
- G. Pruning involves decrease, which is meant to lead to an increase in our fruitfulness in love, spiritual safety, satisfaction in God, and rewards in the age to come. Our sphere of influence or finance may or may not grow larger in a future season, but our heart will, and the benefit will last forever.
- H. The Father needs to prune us because we do not have the wisdom or resolve to cut off the familiar and seemingly good activities in our lives that result from seasons of fruitfulness (15:2b).
- I. He prunes every fruitful believer so that they become more fruitful or successful in His sight. Pruning results in us *possessing* more love and humility in our life and *imparting* it in our ministry.
- J. The Father prunes fruitful branches that are already clean (15:3). I distinguish pruning from God's disciplines that leads us to repentant of compromises in our life (Heb. 12:5-11).
²*...and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*
³*You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. (Jn. 15:2-3)*
⁶*For whom the LORD loves He chastens...¹¹afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:6, 11)*
- K. As we understand the Father as "the Vinedresser," it equips us to trust His leadership with gratitude for His intervention in our life. By understanding the pruning process we are able to respond rightly.
- L. It is common to misinterpret the Father's pruning. This can lead to great discouragement instead of leading us to trust His leadership with thankfulness, knowing that we will be more fruitful in love.
- M. Some confuse God's pruning with His discipline or with the attack of the devil. Thus, they seek to minimize His pruning by looking for areas to repent of or by rebuking Satan's attack (Jas. 4:7).
⁸*...the devil walks about...seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith...*
(1 Pet. 5:8-9)
- N. Seasons of pruning can help us shift our primary focus from man's definition of success to God's definition of success which is to grow in love, humility, and purity.
- O. The picture of abiding with "lasting fruit" is seen in the life of Mary of Bethany. Jesus told her that what she had would "not be taken away" (Lk. 10:42). She prioritized sitting at His feet to talk more with Him. We never hear of her in the book of Acts but she did not lose her place in God's story.
⁴²*But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10:42)*

IV. FOUR SOURCES OF PRESSURE OR OF DECREASE

- A. **The Father's zeal:** He zealously prunes (Jn. 15:2) and/or tenderly disciplines to remove that which hinders love in us (Heb. 12:5-12). *We must submit to His leadership.*
- B. **Satan's attacks:** He seeks to devour us. He has no "cease fire" in his war against us. His attacks are permitted by God to be expressed within the boundaries that God sets. Do not "thank God" for Satan's attack but resist him in the name of Jesus. *We must actively resist him.*
⁷Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (Jas. 4:7)
- C. **Man's sin and weakness:** In our sin and weakness, we can make decisions that can lead to a decrease in blessing that the Lord made available to us. *We are to repent of wrong decisions.*
1. We have a free will to make wrong choices that affect our life and others. Some of the decrease or pressure in our life is because of our weakness and sin.
 2. Weakness is not exactly the same thing as sin. We make poor decisions that create pressure. Some decisions are sinful, while some just lack wisdom without being intrinsically sinful.
- D. **Curse on creation:** Because of Adam's sin, his work was cursed by much toil and frustration (Gen. 3:17-19) and creation "groans" with earthquakes, violent weather patterns, etc., (Rom. 8:22-23). Thus, our work is harder and smaller in its impact. *We are to be faithful to work in the mundane.*
²²For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Rom. 8:22)
¹⁷Cursed is the ground...in toil you shall eat of it...¹⁸Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you [frustration]...¹⁹In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread... (Gen. 3:17-19)

V. WESTERN PARADIGM AND PRUNING

- A. In our Western mindset, we often see "bigger" as "better": to have more money, influence, honor, friends, and comfort is usually seen as being successful without regard for the quality of one's relationship with God. Sometimes more of a "good thing" hinders us from abiding in Christ.
- B. A believer can be popular in ministry—in the Church or marketplace— without being spiritually fruitful. Being wealthy and influential is not synonymous with being faithful and fruitful.
- C. Someone who influences even a few people to grow in love is fruitful from God's point of view. I want to be faithful and fruitful much more than I want to be rich and influential without fruit.
- D. Our highest life goal and primary dream is to be faithful and fruitful. I am grateful when the Lord gives me increase in finances, influence, and other things, but I do not mix that up with being faithful and fruitful in love, humility, and purity. An increase of blessed circumstances helps us, but sometimes it can also test us by giving us the opportunity to be faithful to commitment to abide.