



# Increasing Fruitfulness

John 15:1-8

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based on a message by William Cwirla

In the book *Bad Religion*, the author Ross Douthat offers an account of how American Christianity has gone off the rails and why it threatens to take American society with it. Writing for an era dominated by gridlock and fears of American decline, Douthat exposes the spiritual roots of the nation's political and economic crises. He argues that America's problem isn't too much religion, as some have argued; nor is it an intolerant secularism, as others believe. Rather, it's *bad religion*: the slow-motion collapse of traditional faith and the rise of a variety of pseudo-Christianities that stroke our egos, indulge our follies, and encourage our worst impulses.

*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.* Jesus the vine; we, the branches. He, the source of life, we the ones who live in Him. The image takes us out to wine country, to the rolling vineyards lush with grape vines. Fruitful branches thick with grapes growing on an old, gnarled vine with roots that reach deep into the ground. Jesus is that true vine, the only vine planted by God. His roots go deep down into Israelite soil and God's covenant promise to David, to Israel, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all the way back to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, the place of our origin.

The vine is often used in Scripture as a picture of fruitfulness. In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was often likened to a vineyard. Why does a farmer go through all the trouble of planting and cultivating a vineyard? Because he likes to look at it in the morning when he gets up? No. The farmer plants the vineyard and puts in countless hours of hard labor to get lots of grapes, so that he can sell the wine that comes from the fruit. It's all about the fruit.

The prophet Isaiah writes, *I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. 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.* (Now what do you do? All that work, and no fruit!)

*... 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; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."*

*The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, (today, we might say "Hope Lutheran Brethren Church") and the men of Judah (the people of Hope) are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.* (Isaiah 5:1-7)

Like God's people of old, could that be said of us? All that loving care by God, all His work to bring about faith in our hearts and nourish and sustain our faith, but where's the fruit? He looks for righteousness, but sees so much unrighteousness. He looks for holiness, set-apart-ness in us, but instead, He sees little difference between us, and the rest of the world. No fruit. Or as the author put it, *bad religion*.

Jesus is the True Vine and His Father is the Gardener. What does the Gardener do? What's God's work? *To busy Himself with the branches.* To busy Himself with us, His believing children. What does God do with us? One of two things.

If you're no longer abiding in Jesus, if your faith has died away over time and now you're just going through the motions, not following Jesus, but going your own way instead, if there's no fruit of faith in you, what does the Divine Gardener do with you? What else do you do with dead branches, but cut them off and throw them into the fire? What else are they good for?

On the other hand, if you're remaining in Jesus, following Him, dying to self and living for Him, there will be fruit of that faith in your life and God will prune you, working to make you even more fruitful. Not random, hacking cuts like some of us like to do, but selective, strategic, loving cuts. Doing what's best for you and your life of faith in Jesus.

Look at an unpruned bush or vine sometime, one that hasn't seen the pruner for several years, and what do you see? On the surface, there's a lot of lush green growth. But deep inside what do you find? It's mostly dead wood. And there's very little fruit on such a vine. Fruit happens on new growth, on buds that have been spurred into action by careful pruning.

What's this fruit Jesus is talking about? In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that the "fruit of the Spirit" at work in us through the Word is this: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It's a singular fruit, not multiple fruits. This is the fruit Jesus is referring to when He talks about His disciples being fruitful branches joined to Him.

"Being fruitful" isn't about how much work you can do for Jesus, or how many disciples you can produce for the kingdom. Jesus isn't giving His disciples a check list of things to do. He's telling them what naturally flows from a heart that's been born again. A heart that trusts Him. A heart that clings to Him and His death and resurrection. A heart that obeys Him and His Word. Fruit happens more or less automatically, when the branch is healthy and properly pruned.

*Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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.*

Now if anything *impedes* the flow of juices from the main vine to a branch, what happens? The branch withers, and stops producing fruit and eventually dies. Instead of good fruit, what do we find? Paul gives a few examples of the dead wood of unbelief. He calls them the "works of the flesh" - sex outside of marriage, adultery, immoral living, idolatry, witchcraft or sorcery, fighting, arguing, jealousy, anger, selfishness, divisions and the spirit of division, envy, drunkenness, carousing, that sort of thing.

Cutting and pruning. Cutting is a hopeless act. When you cut, it's over. There's nothing else to do, but throw what's cut off into the fire. But pruning is an act filled with hope. Pruning anticipates what? It anticipates so much more to come. More growth. More fruit ... to the sheer delight of the Gardener! It's to His glory!

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

Pruning is an act filled with hope. Yet pruning is not a lot of fun for whom? For the *branch*. Pruning can be painful. The branch suffers loss and injury. When you prune a grape vine in winter, it's *not* a pretty sight. When you're done, all that's left are a few short stubs with a couple of buds on each of them. But *that's* where the growth comes that makes fruit.

"Why do bad things happen to good people?" we ask. Why do bad things happen to me? Why does God permit tragedy to occur? Why does He let people lose house and home and job and honor? Could it be that God uses such things to prune you? Pruned by the Master Gardener to produce greater love? Greater joy? Greater peace? Greater patience? Greater kindness? Increasing goodness? Increasing faithfulness? Increasing gentleness? Greater self-control?

And that's the way it is most often for us. It isn't until we experience suffering and loss that we discover a *depth* of love, a depth of joy, a depth of peace we haven't know before. You've seen it yourself, or maybe even experienced it for yourself. There's great grief and sorrow. But you turn to Jesus in your misery. You turn to His Word. You commune more intentionally. And you find that the most difficult and painful times in your life are also the most fruitful, spiritually speaking. There's room in your heart for the implanted Word to grow and blossom. And you find a joy and a peace and a softening of the heart that wasn't there before.

As Abby shared in you blog so well, "Going into 2017, for me, is extremely bitter sweet. ... I am not going to lie, 2016 wasn't a great year. It was a hard year filled with things I never thought would become my reality. It made me face my fears, figure out who I am, love myself, learn to fight harder than I thought I could, and Most of all love God. ... Not that any of the things I just listed were 2016 working in my life, they were God. 2016 was the year for God and me. He did all those things for me and has drawn me closer to Him than I ever knew I would be."

What's the purpose of the vine? Not to grow wood or leaves, but to bring forth fruit, fruit that will last. That's the purpose of God's faith-creating work in you. Not simply that you finish the race of faith (as the book of Hebrews puts it) and make it to heaven one day, but that you bear the fruit of faith that He is producing in you through His Word. *Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

How do we bear fruit? Not by becoming more, but by God making us less. We need the hand of the Master Gardener - pruning, cutting away the old man in us. As John the Baptizer said, *"I must decrease. He must*

*increase.*" Fruit happens on new growth, on buds that have been spurred into action by careful pruning. As Paul writes in Galatians 2:20, *"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me."*

How has American Christianity gone off the rails, threatening to take American society with it? Our problem isn't too much religion, or an intolerant secularism, but *bad religion*, fruitless branches, detached from Jesus, the True Vine. *Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:31-32)

John 15 is a good reminder as we remember this past year of Sunday School, abiding in Him, and this coming summer, that we remain abiding in Him. Pruned by the Master Gardener - unto greater love, greater joy, increased peace and patience. Greater kindness and goodness. Increasing faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. The fruit of abiding in the True Vine.

What's life about? Having fun? Being fulfilled? Making a difference? Leaving a legacy? Changing lives? If this were a multiple-choice quiz question, the correct answer would be "none of the above." What's life about? It's about Christ, period. (John Wile) *"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen."* (Romans 11:36)

The secret of the Christian life? The hope of a nation? *"You in Me, and I in you!"*

