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#83

## “The Garden and the Gardener”

John 15:1-3

### Introduction

One of the changes that has taken place from the time I was a boy to now is Chemlawn. There was no such thing, except maybe in some exclusively wealthy neighborhoods, of little guys in gray jump suits with baseball caps, dousing a yard with fertilizer and weed killer. Now, it's common place. And the results are pretty dramatic. I've got some neighbors with yards that look like plush carpeting. But I still think you can tell the difference between a home where a spotless yard has been hired and a yard where a gardener resides.

The purchased yards all have a sterile similarity. The landscaping has all been designed to reflect low maintenance – gravel flower beds, ever green bushes and lawn ornaments. On the other hand, if a true gardener resides at the dwelling, there are carefully thought out mixtures of annuals and perennial flowers so that a variety of color is on display throughout the year. The beds are meticulously weeded. The trees and shrubs are well groomed. And while I am not condemning the former because I know how hard it is to keep up with a yard, I also greater appreciate the latter. The difference of course is love and passion. The hired hand does only what he's paid for. The gardener invests his life in the garden.

Today we come to the final and perhaps most important of all of Jesus' *I am* statements. Over the course of the next couple of weeks we will see just

how important our union with Jesus Christ really is. But today we will begin by learning that without someone outside of ourselves caring for us, we are certain to live a life that lacks the kind of fruitfulness that brings glory to God. In fact the point of the first few verses of this chapter is to show us that we will bear fruit and live for God only if our Father in heaven keeps us.

### [John 15:1-3]

As you probably know the Bible makes very liberal use of what we might call *organic* metaphors. The purpose of these organic illustrations is to help us understand that the Christian life is changing, dynamic, living, and growing. So trees are used to show us that we can be stable if our roots will go deep into the Word of God. Seeds teach us about the need to die to self in order to have life. Sowing and planting illustrate the call to evangelism. Harvests represent God's blessing to us. Weeds remind us of the curse and fall of man. Gardens lift our eyes to heaven. Plagues demonstrate God's judgment, whereas fruit is a sign of His favor. And so it goes.

But perhaps no plant or organism is used more often in the Bible than that of the vine. All through the Old Testament the nation of Israel is compared to a vine – and the context is usually not favorable. Most often the people of God are challenged for being like a wild vine, unproductive, unfruitful and disconnected from God's vineyard.

And so when we come to this great chapter Jesus does some rearranging of terms. He begins by telling us that He is the true vine. He is the real source and provider of life. If we are not connected

to him we are dead. He gives sustenance and nourishment and vitality to those in Him.

The Father is the gardener of the vineyard. He is the one taking care of the garden. He controls the planting and the weeding and the pruning and the watering. He assumes responsibility for all that takes place in the garden. We see that He is sovereign.

The fruit is anything that brings glory to God. Mostly it refers to the things that issue forth from our hearts. It's the inner qualities and characteristics that reflect that we are created in the image of God. It's Christ likeness.

And the branches, of course or those we call Christians. But Jesus is very specific here. He's talking about people who are *in Christ*. That phrase is used here in one form or another 8 times. So this text is not talking about everyone. Nor is it just talking about someone who merely is in the Church. It's not eyeing those who have been baptized. Jesus is not speaking of those in the visible church, but rather those in the invisible church. Those who have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ, washed and forgiven of their sins, and have been adopted into His family. So to be a branch that abides in the vine means to personally know and walk with Jesus Christ. So these are the terms. These are the definitions of the terms.

Now today, we want to focus primarily on the work of the Gardener. What does the Father do? How does He care for His garden? There are two primary things that Jesus mentions.

### **I. He lifts up those not bearing fruit.**

Verse 2 begins by saying *every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away*. The Greek word translated *takes away* in many translations is a word that has two primary meanings. It can mean to take

away. That's how Luke uses it in Luke 8:12. *Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and **takes away the word** from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved.*

But the Word is also common used to convey the idea of lifting up. Matthew 4:6 says *If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You'; and 'On their hands **they will bear You up**, So that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.* In Luke 9:23 Jesus says *If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and **take up his cross** daily and follow Me.*

This is one of those passages where the translation makes a big difference. Does Jesus *lift us up* or does He *remove us* and take us away? The answer is found in our relationship with Christ. I'd like to ask you to compare two verses. Verse 2 says *every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away (or lifts up).* Verse 6 is similar. It says *If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.* What's the difference between the two verses? The difference is the little phrase *in Me*. Verse 2 is speaking of those who are *in Christ*. Verse 6 is speaking of those who are not *in Christ*.

Is it possible to be a Christian, to be *in Christ*, and to be not bearing fruit? Certainly the Scriptures give us plenty of examples of Christian men and women who for a season of their life wandered from God and bore no fruit. David had his season with Bathsheba. Peter had his denial. Certainly not times of fruit bearing.

A year and a half ago, after our fall festival here at the church, someone took the leftovers from the pumpkin carving contest and dumped them outside the back door. The result was all last

summer we watch the church's first ever pumpkin patch. The vines grew and spread all over both sides of the sidewalk. Pumpkin vines are designed to grow on the ground. But if you grow a grape vineyard and allow the vines to lie on the ground, you will never have any grapes. Grape vines need to be lifted up to bear fruit. They need to be exposed to the light. They need to be unencumbered so they can stretch and grow. The task of a vinedresser is to take the grape vines and attach them to the arbor.

This is exactly what the Father does for us. For every branch that is in Christ but not bearing fruit, He lifts us up. When you are struggling with sin, when you get distracted by the world from what is important, when you begin to wander from your fellowship with God and His people, when you begin to neglect the means of grace; when you are tired and weary and discouraged and not sure you can go on; when you are weak or sick or old or afflicted – *if you are in Christ through faith*, then the Father will lift you up. Isn't this what Jesus did for Peter when he walked on the water but then falter upon taking His eyes off of Jesus? He lifted him up. He did it again for him after Peter denied Him three times. He did it for Joseph when he was languishing in a prison in Egypt. He did it for Daniel after they carried him off to Babylon as a prisoner.

And God has done this for you. How often has He cared for you and lifted you up? This 2<sup>nd</sup> verse is a wonderful picture of the love and tenderness and care of our Father in heaven. Remember what Psalm 103 says? *Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.* And because of that love it says that He is the one

*Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases; Who redeems your life from the pit, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; Who satisfies your years with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.*

God uses all kinds of means to lift you up. He will use other Christians to bear up your burdens. That's why you need to be connected to the church. He will use His word to show you what to do. That's why you need to read your Bible every day. He will use His Spirit to comfort and encourage you. That's why you need to pray and fellowship and worship God. But know this, if you belong to Him, if you are *in Him*, He will never leave you, He will never forsake you, He will never take you away. If you are in Christ, you are going to bear fruit. That's how you know you're truly in Christ. Christians do bear fruit. And if and when you struggle, the Father will lift you up.

So this is the first thing the Gardener does, He lifts up those not bearing fruit.

## **II. Prunes for Greater Faithfulness.**

Look at the end of verse 2 and verse 3. *Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.* The word prune means to clean up. The word prune in verse 2 and the word clean in verse three are the same word. Verse 2 is the verb form, verse three is an adjective. It means to remove anything that is detrimental to growth. It might be bugs, mold, dead branches, disease. The eye of the gardener is on the long term fruitfulness of the vineyard.

Pruning is rightly thought of as the discipline and sanctifying work of the Father. The goal is to purify and clean. *Blessed are the pure in heart for*

*they shall see God.* This is the idea. Jesus pronounced judgment on the Pharisees when He said *You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.*

How do we become clean? In this text we see two ways. First, in verse three we see that we become clean by the Word of Christ – that is the gospel which we embrace by faith. When a person puts His faith in the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross he is forgiven and cleansed. Hebrews 10:22,23 summarizes this cleansing. *let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.* (Also, Jesus said to Peter in John 13, *you are clean already.*)

Secondly we are purified from ongoing sin by the pruning work of the Father. He convicts us and confronts us with our sin. He disciplines us as a loving Father. He brings trials and tests to strengthen our faith, hope and love.

Pruning is not easy. It's not fun. *All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.* Fruit is the result of pruning.

So as we conclude this morning, I want to encourage you to welcome the work of the Gardener into your life. If you are not in Christ, not a Christian, this is where you must begin. Call upon Christ in faith and you will be grafted into Him.

If you are in Christ, then your Father in heaven has only good things in store for you. He will lift you up when you are down. He will cleanse

you when you stumble and fall. Fix your hope and your trust upon Him.