

Growing Grapes

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of March 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Growing Grapes and is from John chapter 15 verses 1 to 17. Please be seated.

And you may like to have open the passage from John's Gospel, page 878, John chapter 15. Well known words I'm sure about vines and pruning and growing and bearing fruit.

And in case you didn't know, I am the last person in the world who can speak with any authority about issues to do with gardening. Plants just wither at my sight.

And I imagine that if I had a pair of pruning shears in my hand, though I don't actually know what they look like, then trees would just run away from me because I wouldn't know the first thing about pruning.

[1 : 1 1] And when I see people pruning things back and chopping off all this growth and flowers, it seems to be a criminal act to me. And as for growing grapes, well despite the fact that I drove back through the Yarra Valley from the parish weekend and saw some vineyards and occasionally eat some grapes, that's about as close as I ever get to growing them.

But thankfully, John 15 is not a gardening lesson. It's a spiritual lesson. And vines and pruning and growing and bearing fruit are the metaphor or images that are used to apply to the Christian life in this passage.

In the Old Testament, the people of God, called usually the nation of Israel, was likened to a vine. A vine that God had planted and tended and cared for and nourished.

But often when the image of the people of God being called a vine is used in the Old Testament, it's not so much to talk about what God has done for them as to say how Israel has failed as a vine.

The prophet Jeremiah said, God speaking in effect, I planted you as a choice vine from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?

[2 : 3 4] And in the first reading we heard the prophet Isaiah say similar things. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it. It hewed out a wine vat in it. He expected it to yield grapes. But it yielded wild grapes. That's the people of Israel that are being described by those two prophets.

In contrast to the ancient Israel, in contrast to the people of God that had failed to be a vine bearing fruit, Jesus says of himself, I am the true vine.

I am what the people of God ought to be. I am what the people of God have failed to be for hundreds of years. I am the true vine. In fact, the Old Testament also anticipated that there would come a time when there would be a vine that bore fruit.

Prophet Isaiah later on says something to that effect. Jesus is saying, I am what Israel failed to be. And I am what God promised would come.

[3 : 48] It's a very striking claim when you realise that Old Testament background. You realise that Jesus is making a claim about himself that sets him apart from any other Jew or Israelite in history.

That he and he alone is a true vine. One that bears fruit. One that does what God wants his people to do. It's a fairly egocentric sort of claim.

Maybe not quite on the par of the boastfulness of, say, Muhammad Ali in his songs and words back when he was the top boxer in the world. Jesus' claim, though, would be just as boastful and egocentric if it were not true.

But it is. It is a claim to some sort of perfection. Distinct from any other of God's people in history. But the first words that he then says, having said, I am the vine or the true vine and my father is the vine grower, is to issue a warning.

There are two options for the people of God. Either they don't bear fruit and will be removed. Or they bear fruit and they're pruned to bear more fruit.

[5 : 07] The first option, he sounds at the beginning of verse 2. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. And later in verse 6, whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.

Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. The example in mind, I guess, there are two.

Ancient Israel, which at different times in its history was in effect cut off, sent away into exile, destroyed. And also Judas, who has not borne fruit and has just a few minutes before these words were spoken, left the upper room.

It's the night before Jesus died, remember. And gone to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities. And the words that a branch that bears no fruit will be cut off and withered and burned is not unlike the warnings of Isaiah and Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets against the people of God.

Strong and sober words of warning to the disciples and also through them to us as well. That we could be in the same situation as ancient Israel, facing the wrath and judgment of God if we bear no fruit.

[6 : 23] But the second option, though the preferred option, is also not without pain. The branches that bear fruit, Jesus says at the end of verse 2, God prunes to make bear more fruit.

And pruning does not come without pain. Just like a vine dresser today will cut back the vine very severely in order that the next season much fruit is born, so too God.

And as a non-gardener, when I see people who prune plants around my garden and cut them back so far, I think they've almost killed the plant.

It seems such a shame to do all that growing and then just chop it off. Think what hope have these plants got with such severe pruners around. That's the same sort of pain sometimes that God's spiritual pruning on us does as well.

It's a painful exercise. And it's one that many Christians, I think, resist. But God is in the business of making us not just fruitful but more fruitful.

[7 : 36] And that requires pruning in our lives. In practice, I guess there are two general ways in which God prunes us.

On the one hand, it's sometimes through difficult circumstances. Trials, tribulations, maybe issues like unemployment or ill health or children gone off the rails or parents gone off the rails.

Sometimes it's a thorn in a flesh. It's maybe bereavement. Maybe some tragedy or difficulty that befalls us in our life. Often those situations are God's way of pruning us.

Of forcing us to bear more fruit. That the fruit we bear will be born even in the face of difficulty and trial. Not in the face of ease and comfort.

The other way that God prunes us is to cut out of us our deep-rooted sinful practices and habits.

[8 : 43] After all, if we are bearing fruit, then there is a sense in which the sins and evils and fruitlessness within us is being overcome and done away with.

For some people, that might mean that God is pruning them of their lusts. For others, it might be pruning them of bad temper. Of greed.

Or laziness. Or lack of love for other people. Might be for wrong dependence. Whether that's dependence on things like drugs or drink.

Or whether it's dependence upon other people. That is ungodly. There are two general ways, those lists aren't complete of course. That God, I think, prunes us through the circumstances that he contrives in our life.

Often that are difficult in order to force us to bear more fruit. And sometimes through the direct cutting out of us of sinful habits and practices that have taken such deep root in our lives.

[9 : 51] Let me just give one example, I guess, from my own life where the first situation applied. When I was in England before coming to Doncaster doing my PhD.

After being there a few months, I was really struggling. And as I thought and prayed about this, I realised that what I was struggling about was a number of things.

In the change from being a minister in Melbourne to being a PhD student in England. I didn't belong. I was a foreigner in that country. My family and friends were all in Australia.

But also the esteem and value placed on work where you see other people benefit from your work was no longer there. Nobody was benefiting from me sitting in an office writing a PhD.

And I came to realise that what was happening in a sense was that God had taken away various things that in some ways I'd relied upon.

[10 : 49] And he was pruning me to rely on him more through a difficult situation. Now I know that many people have gone through much more difficult situations than what I'd been through. But it was a sobering reminder to me that God was pruning me.

So that I wasn't relying on my work, I was relying on God. I wasn't relying on my friends or family, but I was relying on God. And so on. That was a helpful lesson for me to learn.

The danger I think Christians face is that we resist being pruned by God. But when we resist pruning, we actually run the danger then of not bearing fruit at all.

To take the first example of the circumstances that God contrives in order to prune us. Very often Christians respond to strife, distress and trouble, not with an eagerness or willingness for God to use that situation that they may grow and bear fruit, but rather by complaining.

Now often our initial complaints are quite justified. But if that's only ever as far as we get spiritually with the difficulties of our life, then we're running the risk of not bearing fruit at all.

[12 : 08] Whatever situations we face in life, God is seeking for us to bear fruit. And if we don't get beyond complaining and whinging and grumbling and murmuring, then we're resisting God pruning us.

To take the second example, too many of us, if not all of us, at times sin rather happily and blithely and with carefree abandon.

We don't really struggle to overcome sin. We don't struggle to resist temptation to do wrong. We don't strive to overcome our lovelessness or our greed or our meanness or our lusts or our wrong desires or our arrogance or our pride.

We resist God pruning us when he seeks to cut those things out of our life. Yes, it's painful to be pruned, but we must bear the pain of pruning if we are to grow in bearing fruit.

Well, now to take it positively, how do we then bear fruit? And the word or expression that is used in this chapter is to abide in Christ.

[13 : 31] Verse 4, Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing. The first point that those two verses is making very clearly is that if we are to bear fruit, Jesus is essential.

We cannot bear fruit without him. He is the one who makes fruit happen. So whatever bearing fruit is and whatever it means to abide in Christ, Jesus is essential for fruit to appear.

Now often in our language the idea of abiding in something has connotations of being passive, of sitting back and relaxing, abiding in our sort of favourite comfortable chair or something like that.

I think abiding often has the sort of connotation that the sign above the spa pool at Aquarina in Doncaster says, sit back and relax. But that's all very well if there weren't bubbles of jet water trying to push you across the other side of the spa pool.

[14 : 51] Can you just sit back and relax with all this jet water on you? Well, you actually have to hold on I think. Otherwise you're blown across the other side of the pool. So to abide is actually an active thing.

And it certainly is active in this chapter even though my example of a spa pool is probably a bit trivial. Now Jesus doesn't actually quite define what to abide in him is.

But there are five things with which it's associated that I think give us enough understanding that this is an active process. In verse 7 he says, if you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

If we are abiding in Jesus then his words are abiding in us. And at least one point is that those are words of salvation.

Words of acceptance and love. The words of the gospel that he's been speaking throughout John's gospel. So if we are to abide in Jesus it will mean that we are trusting in him for our salvation.

[16 : 01] That's an active thing. It's not sitting back complacently, luxuriating in the salvation he gives us, but an active trust in Jesus and what he's done for us.

And at least in this verse that is expressed by active praying. If you are abiding in Christ you are a praying person. That's the connection I think in verse 7 between my words dwelling in you and praying.

That is that we can come through salvation to the throne of God's grace confident and assured that our prayers will be heard by a loving father. So if we're not praying actively and if we're not praying godly and assured prayers to God the father confident in the salvation he's won for us through Jesus then we're not abiding in Jesus.

In verse 9 the second association as the father has loved me so I have loved you abide in my love. If we're abiding in Jesus then we're abiding in his love.

And similar to what I've just said from verse 7 applies here. That that is that we know that we're loved through the words of the gospel. Our acceptance and salvation by Jesus and by the heavenly father.

[17 : 20] Notice how intense this love is. Just as the father has loved me Jesus said so I have loved you abide in my love. We cannot imagine a closer love than that between God the father and God the son.

It is a perfect love. But that same love is the love with which Jesus has loved us. It's not a less intense love.

The same love that the father has for the son is the love that we receive from Jesus Christ. A perfect love. Abide in it Jesus says.

Some Christians spend their Christian life fearful that God really doesn't love them. That Jesus really doesn't love them. Sometimes we spend our Christian lives scared of God.

Feeling remote from him. But fruitful Christians who abide in Jesus know the love of God that has been given to them in Jesus Christ.

[18 : 26] And they can rest assured and confident in it. And therefore bear real fruit. But to the extent that we doubt or are fearful or afraid of God or feel that he is remote or that we haven't received his love then we won't bear fruit.

In our lives. The third association of abiding in Jesus comes in the next verse. Verse 10. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love.

And again the model is the father and the son relationship. Just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love. Jesus expressed his love in response to the father's love for him by obedience.

so too we express our love for Jesus in response to his love for us by obeying his commands. You see abiding in Christ isn't a sort of mystical experience of somehow some deep emotion within us of Jesus' love enveloping us or something like that.

Abiding in Jesus is fairly practical. It's relatively down to earth. when we obey Jesus we are abiding in his love. So when we act generously to other people in obedience to Jesus we are abiding in him.

[19 : 50] When we're faithful to our spouse in obedience to Jesus then we're abiding in him. When we speak the gospel to other people in obedience to Jesus' command then we are abiding in him.

when we're honest with the taxation department or honest on the telephone to a friend then we are obeying Jesus and abiding in him.

Oh the list is endless almost of course. I'm just singling out a few examples to help you see what it means. But when we obey Jesus' commands then we are abiding in him.

The obedience will be a response to his love not an attempt to gain it. It's clear not only in this passage but throughout the Bible that the love that we receive from God through Jesus Christ is initiated by him not something that we deserve.

Jesus spells that out in verse 16 at the end of today's passage nearly. You did not choose me but I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit. The initiative lies with Jesus.

[20 : 57] Our obedience is a response to his love. We mustn't put the cart before the horse and think that somehow we can obey. In order to stir up God's love for us.

The crunch of course in obedience comes when choosing to obey will mean that we decide not to do something that we want to do. There are lots of things I think Christians find that really to obey Jesus is easy because it's sort of what we would want to do anyway.

The crunch comes when obeying Jesus and what we want to do are different things and too often I think we just do what we want to do but if we bear fruit we will obey him.

The fourth association is in verse 11. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

That is abiding in Jesus is accompanied by joy and in particular obedience to Jesus is accompanied by joy.

[22 : 09] Now that runs against the general caricature our world has of Bible believing Christians. People in the world think that those who are obedient to what the Bible commands can't have any joy because God is a party pooper.

God is against fun and all his commands are basically summed up by don't enjoy yourself. Do what God wants. Sometimes we Christians forget that obedience to God is full of joy.

And a sign of abiding in Jesus is that we will have joy in obeying him. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 1, we are to be people who delight in God's law and doing it.

In contrast, the Bible tells us that sins, pleasures and joys are fleeting. often we forget that.

We're faced with a decision to obey Jesus or to do something that is sinful but clearly pleasurable because if it were not pleasurable, then there would be no temptation to do it.

[23 : 25] What do we do? We have to remind ourselves that the joys of obedience far outweigh the fleeting pleasures of sin.

The context in which Jesus spoke these words heightens and sharpens that idea. He's speaking these words just hours before he dies on a cross. That is his supreme act of obedience and yet he can say in verse 11 that he has joy.

The writer to the Hebrews says a similar thing. Jesus was obedient even to death on the cross for the joy that lay before him beyond. There would have been more pleasure for Jesus to evade the cross by saying whatever the authorities wanted him to say so that he could escape its pain.

But no, Jesus knew that in the eternal scales the joys of obedience to God the father far outweighed the joy of evading the cross and its pain and shame and ignominy and so on.

We must take a similar perspective when we face decisions in our life. The joys of obedience last forever. The pleasures of sin are fleeting.

[24 : 46] the fifth association of what it means to abide in Jesus comes in verse 12 onwards. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.

Jesus has already elaborated on the theme of love in chapter 13 when he washed the disciples feet and told them that that was a sign pointing to his death on the cross for them, an act of loving service above all others.

But what he's saying there is that if we are to abide in Jesus and bear fruit therefore that we cannot do that individualistically. It is an individual and personal thing but it's not something done in isolation.

Christians who abide in Christ love one another in the same way that Jesus loves us. that doesn't just mean being nice and polite to other Christians on a Sunday morning.

It means being prepared to give up our all for them. Over the last 200 years the Western world has become very individualistic in its way of thinking.

[26 : 00] Gone are the sort of corporate ways of thinking about village life and communal life. We become more and more our own person. The human rights movement I think stresses that as well.

That it's what my rights are not what even somebody close to me's rights are that matter. And that sort of thinking infiltrates Christian thinking too. Too often our Christian thinking has become a personal private piety deriving from Victorian era.

But Christian living is never private. It's always public still personal though it is. If we are to be fruitful Christians it will mean being involved corporately with the body of Christ.

Loving other people and other Christians in the same way that Jesus has loved us. If that's what abiding in Jesus is in order to bear fruit it remains to be said what is fruit.

And Jesus does not simply define it in this passage. knowledge. Nowhere does he say in a sentence and this is fruit dot dot dot. The context determines what fruit is.

[27 : 17] And that's always the case with establishing the meaning of a word unless it's simply defined for us we know the meaning of something through its context. There are English words that have various different meanings and we know what is meant because of the context.

I mean if I were to say to you what is a chair you'd probably say something with four legs. But if I was to say to you the chair chaired the meeting your definition of a chair is nonsense.

It's a person. But it's the context that determines what is meant. I'm in the middle of reading the biography of a man called James Murray. James Murray was the editor in effect of the Oxford English Dictionary first edition.

He took on the task in about 1860s and for nearly 50 years I think was its painstaking editor. 20,000 pages of definitions of English words.

But one of the things that he was very clear about and his genius was that the word is defined by its context and so he sought to find the use of words over the last 800 years in English literature and writing and so on in order to see how a word is used which determines its meaning.

[28 : 31] That is its context determines the meaning. So in this passage what is the context for fruit? Well firstly fruit is going to be the opposite of what the Old Testament Israelites were doing.

They were not bearing fruit. So when we see their various sins of pride and arrogance and greed and immorality and idolatry and so on we realise that if we're to bear fruit it will mean being faithful to God.

It will mean being godly in our character. And the other sorts of associations we've seen already in this passage today show us that bearing fruit means that we will be godly people, that we will be Christ-like in our character, that we will be trusting in Jesus' death, that we will be loving in our obedience, that we will be full of joy and so on.

I think it's too simple to say that Galatians 5 lists the fruit of the spirit, that's what's meant here. I think it's too simple to say that elsewhere bearing fruit means winning converts.

Neither of those is the context for this passage. Fruit here means godly, Christ-like, loving character. And that is what God wants to see in each one of us.

[29 : 48] So then this passage demands of us that we ask ourselves, is our fruit evident? If someone walked past this vine, would they think what fruitful pruning has been going on?

Or would they see just scattered grapes that look a bit sad and sorry? Is our love for others shaped by Jesus' love for us?

Or are we selective and restricted in the way we love others? temptation? Is there abiding joy in our Christian lives?

Even as we practice obedience and resist temptation? Even in the midst of painful pruning? Or are we people characterized more by grumbling and complaining than Christ-like joy?

Is there obedience in the face of temptation? temptation? Or don't we know what temptation is because we give in so quickly we never realize we're being tempted?

[30 : 58] Is there effective praying going on? They're the sorts of questions that will guide us about whether we are fruitful or not.

On the other hand, it may be that we are resisting pruning, that we're clinging to sin and letting deep-rooted sin in our life carry on regardless.

Or we're complaining at our misfortune and not growing through pruning. The only other option to pruning that Jesus gives us in this passage is even more painful.

It's to be cut off, to wither, and to die. Amen. Amen.