

**John 15:1-8**

**Easter 5; April 28 & 29, 2024**

The first time that I did it, did I catch grief. The church that I served many years ago in Florida, had a number of rose bushes along the south side of the building. They had gotten out of control. There was only one thing that could be done with them anymore. They needed to be cut back. So, I cut them back – way back. There was not much of them left after I cut them back. When people came to church on Sunday, I heard: *What did you do to the roses?* I responded and said: *Just wait. You'll see.* Over the next couple of months, they came back stronger than ever. They were fuller than before. Pruning makes them stronger than before.

When we have gone out to visit our son in California, he has a small front yard. Since, I love to work outside, he tends to leave his yard for me to cut – not only to cut the grass, but the bushes as well. In front of the porch on the front of his house, he has several rose bushes. If it has been a little while since we have been there, the rose bushes may get out of control. We've been known to cut them back not just with a little hand clipper, but with a chain saw to cut through the thick trunks on the bushes. What happens? They come back better than before. Pruning makes them stronger than before.

Look at how Jesus talks about the relationship between the vine and the branches. He says: **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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... 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.”** Are those words comforting or are they terrifying? Sometimes, they are used by people to terrify. *“If you don't have enough fruit in your life, you are going to be cut down and thrown into the fire. Do you want to be thrown into hell? If you want to avoid going to hell, you better roll up your sleeves and start working so that you begin to produce fruit.”* If Jesus is saying that, these words of John 15 would be terrifying words. However, that is not what Jesus is saying. Bearing fruit does not bring life in Jesus. It is Jesus who brings life to the branches. Jesus tells his disciples: **“You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to you.”** They have faith in him. They are connected to him through the Word that Jesus has spoken. Now that they have life in Jesus, fruit will come out through the branches.

Bearing fruit is what branches do. Bearing fruit is not optional for the believer in Christ. Jesus says: **“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** Bearing fruit is wonderful, but you don't become a believer by bearing fruit. Bearing fruit is not the path to heaven. You bear fruit and are growing because you are united to Christ. It is the vine that gives life to the branches. It is not the branches that gives life to the vine. Branches abide in the vine. We are connected, nurtured, and receive life itself from Jesus, the Vine. He is with us. He nurtures us. He gives us all we need, moment by moment. He gives us everything. He gives us life itself! He gives His own life! We abide in Jesus. Branches abide in the vine. Bearing fruit always flows from abiding in Jesus. The branch receives from the vine, as it abides in the vine. And from that abiding, from that receiving, the fruit naturally follows. That is not a command, it is simply how it works. Bearing fruit always flows from abiding.

That does not mean the fruit is always perfect. It also does not mean producing new fruit every single day, season after season, like some factory that runs three shifts. Jesus does not require a quota, and He is not comparing the fruit of one branch to the fruit of another. But bearing fruit is not optional. Either a branch bears fruit and it is pruned, or it does not bear fruit and it is burned. So, the question is: *what is the purpose of the pruning?*

The purpose of the pruning is not meant to strike terror in our hearts. Bearing fruit is not the way to heaven. The purpose of pruning is not to see if you can make it to a certain level to be able to be saved. Pruning is always done to make the branches stronger. God prunes us to make us stronger. God wants to bless us by pruning us. He wants to remove all those things that get in the way of making fruit. Pruning is done to make more fruit. So, what needs to be pruned in our lives? That will vary from person to person. Maybe we need to have some attitudes removed from our hearts. Maybe some habits need to be removed. Maybe our priorities need to be changed. Maybe it is as simple as asking the question: *What does God need to take out of our life to make us more joyful?*

Pruning can become messy sometimes. If you have ever done pruning on trees, bushes, flowers, etc., you know how it can look for a moment. The branches, the leaves all on the ground. Yet, you also know that it may look messy now, but once it is all cleaned up, it will look much better after you are done. The trees, bushes, flowers will be much stronger than before.

That's what God wants to do with us. He wants to take all of that messy sin in your heart and cut it out. God wants to take away and forgive our sins in order that we may produce more fruit. Branches abide in the vine. We are connected, nurtured, and receive life itself from Jesus, the Vine. He gives us all we need, moment by moment. He gives us everything. He gives us life itself! He gives His own life! We abide in Jesus. Branches abide in the vine. We don't bear fruit to abide in Christ. As we abide in Christ, we bear fruit. It is the vine that gives us life.

The more we grow in our love for Jesus, the more we see opportunities to show love to others. The Apostle Paul speaks describes that in his letter to the Galatians: **"<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."** (Gal. 5:22-26)

If you look around outside at this time of the year, everything is beginning to bud out. The leaves are coming out from the branches; the flowers are coming up from the bulbs in the ground; the grass is greening out; the trees are beginning to blossom. Look around you and you will see branches bearing fruit. May we trust those words of Jesus: **"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."** May God grant it. Amen.