



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Branchology 101

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 13, 2019

Introduction to Scripture

The past three decades have seen an explosion in popularity of wine-making in the Middle East nation of Israel. The industry is currently producing over 50 million bottles of wine a year, and it has become a major export. The United States is the primary foreign market for Israeli wine, and its quality is growing as it is being recognized and ranked by wine experts worldwide. There are several major wine-growing areas in Israel (which is a nation about the size of the state of New Jersey). The most successful regions are in the hills of Galilee and the Golan Heights (which was the home area of Jesus and most of His disciples); the coastal plain near the Mediterranean; and the hill country in and surrounding Jerusalem. Israeli wines include Cabernet Sauvignons, Chardonnays, Merlots, Sauvignon Blancs, and Rieslings. “Enotourism” (the term for people who like to visit wineries for tastings) is becoming a booming sub-industry for the Israeli Tourism Office. But all of this is no surprise to us who have read our Bibles. For vineyards and grape-cultivating and harvesting and wines are found throughout the Scriptures, including many spiritual references and comparisons.

That is what we will encounter this morning, as we open the Gospel of John. The setting is that final, fateful night before the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. He has just shared His final intimate Pass-over meal with His closest friends (one of whom is in the process of committing the most notorious act of treachery the world has ever seen). He has washed their feet in an act of servanthood. He has broken the bread and poured out the wine to demonstrate His pending

sacrificial death. And now He is about to instruct His followers on how they must carry on once He is gone from them.

“Come, let’s be going.

15 “I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ³You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

⁵“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father....

¹⁶“You didn’t choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name.”

John 14:31–15:1-8, 16 (NLT)

The Metaphor Message

It’s a pleasure for our congregation to be hosting again this January some grad students from Gordon-Conwell Seminary who are preparing for future ministry. One of the things I’ll be talking with them about is the different options a pastor has in structuring a weekly message like the one for today. Pastors can do “narrative sermons” that retell a story from the Bible; they can do verse-by-verse “expository sermons” that take a congregation through a text; they can do “topical sermons” that address questions and issues. But this

morning I'll be presenting to you a message that is just an extended "metaphor." "Metaphor" is a fancy English-teacher term for a graphic or visual image of something that is tangible in the world but that corresponds to an intangible or spiritual or inward reality.

A few weeks ago, on the first Sunday in Advent, our own Pastor June Barrow gave us a remarkable example of a metaphor sermon as she talked about the image of a clay pot and its creation on a potter's wheel. Clay utensils were ubiquitous in the ancient world, in the days before plastic. Every home had clay pots and mugs and dishes. And the process of production involved a craftsman called a potter, a lump of formless moistened clay, and a wheel to spin the clay. It was a common biblical image, used repeatedly by the writers of scripture. June broke the metaphor into its component parts for us: God is the potter, you and I are the clay, and the spinning wheel is the ever-changing events and circumstances of life. Then she drew out the spiritual lessons for us.

Today we will follow a similar process with the biblical metaphor of the grapevine and the branches. This would have been as common and familiar to people of the ancient Middle East as clay kitchen utensils. Wine (whether fermented or not—what we might call Welch's Grape Juice today) was a feature of most evening meals, and grapes were a regular staple of their diet. You and I might not regularly visit vineyards, but the disciples saw them everywhere. In fact, I personally suspect that the words we read may well have been spoken by Jesus at a vineyard, as His disciples gathered around Him. (I believe that because, in the verse just prior to the start of the vineyard metaphor, Jesus invites them to leave the dining room and start out for the Garden of Gethsemane ... so they may well have passed a vineyard on their way there.)

The Vine and the Branches

Here are the important components of this image as Jesus shared it. The **Vine** is Jesus Himself—the One who gives life and health. The **Branches** are all of us, His followers, the people who belong to Him.

And the **Vineyard-keeper** or Gardener is God the Father. The sole purpose of the branches (that would be us) is to produce the fruit, the grapes that come out of the branches and are suspended from them. The reason we are studying this passage today is because we are focusing this month of January on the topic of “bearing fruit.” I talked about it last week—and we were reminded again in our Call to Worship of the Old Testament psalm (92) we studied a week ago, which tells us that God’s purpose for His people is to bear fruit in every season of their lives. We will spend the next few minutes looking more closely at the fruit-bearing purpose of a grapevine (we can call this an introductory course in “**Branchology 101**”). Then next week I will complete this three-part series, looking at another section of scripture that speaks to our calling to “bear fruit.”

There are two significant principles Jesus teaches us branches about His intention and purpose for us.

Key Principle #1

Branches can only bear fruit if they remain attached to the Vine.

The Vine—which has a solid and strong upright trunk and a network of roots that go deep into the soil and draw moisture and nutrients from it—is what ultimately produces the fruit. A Branch serves as the medium, the conduit, through which the water flows; its leaves soak in the light from the sun to work the amazing process of forming clumps of juicy grapes. But any Branch cut off from the Vine immediately loses its ability to produce fruit—no matter how hard it may try, no matter its willpower and determination. Ultimately the Branch will not only be fruitless, but also will begin to wither, dry up and die.

This principle is self-evident in the functioning of a grapevine, but is often forgotten by human beings when it applies to our spiritual lives. The temptation to be self-reliant, to think that it’s all about our willpower, our determination, is ever present. We humans like to try to do things ourselves, and consciously learning and practicing how

to “remain” or “abide” in Christ and draw our strength from Him is a lifelong process. Many of the most faithful and fruitful Christians I know have somehow learned the secret of doing this. They seem to have a confidence that God is with them and in them. They seem less anxious and fearful than I often feel. They have an ability to patiently wait on the Lord to act in His time and way. These fruitful Branches have been my role models. I want to learn to be like them, because I want my life, when I reach the end of it, to be judged as having been fruitful.

How do we “remain” (or, in other English translations, “abide”) in Christ our Vine? There are many practices and “spiritual disciplines” lifted up in Scripture and offered regularly in the life of the church. Prayer and the reading of the Bible, attending worship services and classes and special events, memorizing scripture, reading good books, talking with others—all can help us. But the key is our inner attitude or heart. External practices make a difference only when we have invited Christ into our life and consciously yielded to Him to live within us.

Key Principle #2

Fruitful branches must be pruned to keep bearing fruit.

That reality is consistently true for the wine-making industry. Once grapes are harvested, the vineyard keepers do aggressive cutting to remove large portions of the leaves. To the unknowing it would appear to be damaging to the plants, but it’s actually the most beneficial act—a kind cut. The biological necessity is this: if the branches are not cut back and allowed to grow unchecked, all the nutrients will flow into the leaves. Removing those leaves pushes more energy into the fruit to allow the next crop.

From a distance, an unpruned vine may look beautiful and healthy. But its focus is on the wrong things. Its fruit-bearing ability becomes stunted. Examined up close, a lovely and leafy unpruned vine will have no grapes. What a powerful lesson for our spiritual lives—and

one that at first may seem counterintuitive. The “cuts” that come to us in life (which can represent the challenges, difficulties, hardships, trials, setbacks, and disappointments that we all will encounter at times) can serve as God’s pruning shears. The cuts hurt. If a vine had nerves, it would certainly feel the pain of the pruning. But the purpose in the short-term pain is long-term fruit bearing. Is it possible that God, the all-wise Vineyard-keeper, is allowing you and me to experience various cuts because He is in the process of preparing us to bear more fruit? Nobody enjoys the cutting and pruning. We would rather avoid it, or have it over quickly. If only we could see the trials of our lives from God’s perspective, rather than our own.

Here’s a dramatic example from our own times of a person whom God put through a painful and extensive pruning process to produce remarkable fruit in and through him. The man’s first name is Charles. He was very successful and achieved a high rank of power and influence. And then it all crashed down. And he ended up as an inmate in a federal prison camp. When Chuck Colson walked out of Maxwell Federal Penitentiary at the end of his sentence and heard the bars clang behind him, his intense desire was to never go into a prison again. But God had an unexpected plan for him. The crisis of Watergate and his conviction had brought Colson to faith. And now a new chapter in his life was about to be written.

It was not long afterward that some newfound Christian friends of Chuck’s, part of a network in Washington called “The Fellowship,” invited him to go with them to an unlikely place. Attica State Prison, a maximum-security facility in upstate New York, had recently been the site of a prison riot. The atmosphere was toxic. In desperation, the warden had allowed a Christian group to come and seek to bring some peace and reconciliation. Colson and a couple others were ushered into a public place, where angry and dangerous inmates were seated on folding chairs. A row of armed guards lined the base of the stage to protect the people on the platform. When Colson was introduced, something tugged in his heart. He took the microphone, jumped down from the stage, pushed his way through the guards

and walked towards the men. “I’ve been right where you are. I know what it’s like. And I’m going to tell you how I got through it.” He proceeded to talk to them about inviting Christ into their lives. In that moment Chuck Colson could see what God had been up to in pruning him so painfully.

Colson could have never founded the worldwide Prison Fellowship—a ministry that has changed hundreds of thousands of lives over four decades—had he not gone through his personal ordeal. The cuts of the pruning shears may prepare us to bear more fruit. There are ways in which the experiences of life have uniquely equipped you to bear a certain kind of fruit for God. You have the potential to impact someone else. And you may not yet have discovered all the fruit God desires to produce through you—just as Chuck Colson couldn’t imagine when he was released from prison what he would be able to do for other prisoners.

Every one of us is unique in our personalities, our abilities and our life experiences. If we stay close to Christ our Lord and are willing to be used by Him, He will lead and direct us into the fruit-bearing that is His purpose for us. Be on the watch for those opportunities. Be ready to respond when they come. And when **you** go through a pruning experience, don’t panic or conclude that God has deserted you or is punishing you. He is **preparing** you.

Spiritual Fruit

We have learned our lessons from the metaphor of the Vine and the Branches. We have come to the end of our mini-course on Branchology 101. Next week we complete our examination of the calling to be fruitful Christians.

There are actually two different categories of fruit that God wants to produce in us. And this is comparable to the literal fruit of the vine. A grapevine ultimately yields both drink and food. The grapes it yields may be pressed and liquified and bottled into wine, or they may be destined for the table to be eaten.

In the same way, we as spiritual branches attached to the Vine are to produce two different categories of fruit: first, we bear fruit that is actions and, second, we bear fruit that is personal character. The first type of spiritual fruit can include words we write or speak, volunteer service, jobs we hold, a marriage we maintain and nurture, children we raise and teach, financial giving to worthy causes and needy people, and many other examples. But the actions of our spiritual fruit are to be coupled with the inner character and maturity that God is producing in us: a sense of peace and trust, a compassion for others, a resilience that deals with life's challenges by faith.

It is **both** kinds of fruit (our outer actions and our inner spirit) that honor Jesus our Lord and make an impact for Him in this world. ■

