



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Fruit That Won't Spoil

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ SEPTEMBER 25, 2022

*You did not choose me, but I chose you
and appointed you so that you might go and
bear fruit—fruit that will last.*

John 15:16

Seeking a Teacher

Imagine it's about 90 years ago. You are a bright young university student in England in the years between the two world wars. You have just graduated with what they call in the British system a "first" degree (equivalent to our American designation of "Magna Cum Laude" or "Summa Cum Laude"), and you want to pursue a doctoral degree in the field of English literature. In British higher education (both then and today), those desiring advanced degrees must seek out and apply to the scholar they wish to be mentored by and study under. That professor, if they are approved, will then personally tutor and guide the student all the way through their research and the writing of their dissertation. The application and qualification process can be rigorous and daunting.

So you, the aspiring scholar, decide that you would like to study under a prominent and distinguished professor at Magdalen College of Oxford named Dr. Clive Staples Lewis. He was revered as the most engaging lecturer and the most searching mind across all the Oxford campuses. (He will, of course, go on to an even more prominent additional career as a best-selling author, speaker, and radio commentator). To earn the privilege of studying under C. S. Lewis was a highly competitive process. You first write a letter of introduction

with a resume of your coursework and credentials. Then you are summoned to a most intimidating interview, as his searching questions come at you like machine gun bullets and he probes your mind for its ability to comprehend and express itself on deep subjects. After the interview (and several others like it with other hopeful students), Professor Lewis (he was known as “Jack” by his colleagues, but no student would ever call him anything other than “Professor Lewis”) will make his final decision on which individuals will be the lucky few to spend the next several years learning from him.

Now let’s go further back in time, not 90 years but 1,990 years, to another part of the world. Imagine that you are a young Jewish lad who desires to learn God’s Word and prepare to be a teacher of it. There are, around the cities and towns of Galilee and Judea, a number of prominent rabbis—each with his own small academy.

A student would be responsible to seek out the one they wished to study under, apply to him, and try to demonstrate their skills and competence. And perhaps, if they were among the fortunate few, the teacher would agree to let the student disciple follow in his footsteps and sit at his feet as he instructed him in the Old Testament’s Law, Prophets and Writings.

The two educational processes (modern Britain and ancient Israel), separated by nearly two millennia, are strikingly similar. In both cases, the students seek out their teacher and try to demonstrate that they are worthy of his time and attention. But there was one unusual Man who came along once and Who did things backwards.

The Teacher’s Way

This Teacher (who Himself was not taught by any human institution nor granted any human degree, but Who spoke with a genius, an impeccable eloquence and a penetrating wisdom such as the world had never seen) did not wait for students to come to Him and apply for acceptance by Him. It was the reverse. He traveled around seeking students. **He** took the initiative; He recruited and **chose them** not

for any credentials or recommendations or degrees they brought, but for reasons that were inscrutable—not only to the watching world but even to the students themselves. He selected them for reasons known only to Himself, and when He chose a student He said simply, “Follow Me.” Some made the eternally regrettable decision to decline the invitation. Others—in some cases, unaware of why—said “Yes,” and their lives were permanently transformed.

There are two profound truths we are encountering this morning. They were so fundamental to the Christian faith that, on the last night Jesus had with His disciples before He gave His life for them and for us on the cross, He reviewed these two truths with them. They are captured in the verse we just read from John 15. First, the truth that we have been chosen by God. If you are a Christian, it’s not by accident. You are personally selected by Him. The second truth: you and I have been chosen by Him not only that we might experience forgiveness and a personal relationship with Christ, but also that our lives might “bear fruit.” And we will talk in a moment about what that means, what that is supposed to look like.

Let’s consider our first point. And we do so with a sense of both awe and mystery. Why was I chosen? Why were you? What could there have possibly been in either of us that would make us worthy of such kindness, such privilege? The answer is that there wasn’t anything in us to make us qualified. It was all His gracious choice.

The people who knew those who would become disciples of Jesus in their “BC” days (before Christ) certainly couldn’t see anything worthy in a tax collector named Matthew or fishermen named John and Peter, or a domestic terrorist named Simon the Zealot, or any of the others. Only Jesus could see their potential, and could envision who they would become after spending time with Him. The same wonder should be felt by us as we consider why God chose us.

Let’s be clear that the message of Christ is actually presented to the whole world, and every single man and woman and child is given this general invitation to come to Him, to place their faith in Him.

No one who has ever lived has been worthy of God's mercy and grace, and no one who has turned to Him has ever been denied it. But, while I can't possibly explain it completely, the teaching of the Scripture seems to be that in some way God works in the hearts and lives of people to open them up to faith.

If you are a believer, things have happened in your life and inside your own mind to bring you to this place. You are not an accidental Christian. He knows you and has chosen you. Why is not every person on earth a believer? I can't pretend to know the mind of God. But this I do know: For reasons known only to Him, the Lord has chosen you and me. That is no grounds for boasting or feeling proud. It should instead humble us. It confronts us with our unworthiness. And it should make us profoundly grateful.

We can never earn God's grace. But we can respond to it with thanksgiving and with the offering of ourselves to Him. So we come to the second of our great truths today. We are chosen for a purpose, and that purpose is to "go and bear fruit—fruit that will last."

A Living Illustration

To put this in its original context, let's read the verses that came just before our text, starting in John 15:1. It's very possible, since Jesus and His disciples were traveling from an upstairs dining room in Jerusalem where they had celebrated the Passover meal, to the Garden of Gethsemane just outside the city limits, that they were actually passing a vineyard as the Teacher used a living illustration that was before their eyes.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He 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. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵“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. ⁶If 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. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

John 15:1-8

Spiritual Fruit

We could spend much time exploring the implications of this profound analogy or metaphor of faith. But my focus this morning is simply this: as a grapevine exists for the purpose of producing grapes, the purpose of a Christian is to bear spiritual fruit.

There are two different categories of “fruit” (the work of Christ in our lives). The first kind of fruit, described in more detail in other parts of the New Testament, is the development of Christian character and behavior in our own lives. We are “bearing fruit” when we learn to love people more with Christ’s unselfish love; when we give of our time and our resources and talents to serve God and help others; when we choose patience rather than temper when others frustrate us; when we say no to our desires and practice self-discipline, and a thousand other ways of conforming our lives to the example of Jesus.

For a partial list of the various spiritual fruits of Christian character, you can read chapter 5 of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. And you can observe the lives of the people around you (and the people who have preceded us) who have demonstrated the inner change of heart and actions that Christ within us produces. Just as the vine produces grapes from within, so our Lord produces behavior change in us if we are staying vitally connected with Him. And just as the branches will be unable to make grapes if they are cut off from the vine, so we

will be fruitless if we drift away from God and stop doing those things (like worship, prayer, reading the Bible and fellowship with other Christians) that keep us vitally attached to our True Vine.

The other kind of spiritual fruit God wants to produce in and through us is to impact other people positively. Parents and grandparents are given an amazing opportunity to shape the lives of young people. So are coaches and teachers. Employers and supervisors establish a corporate culture and an example that impacts those who serve under them. Medical professionals, first responders, and other professionals can touch lives in positive ways. Volunteers and donors in a church or community charity can leverage and broaden their impact.

What John 15 tells us is that the spiritual fruit God desires to bring forth out of us is “fruit that will last.” That is clearly and intentionally a distinction from natural fruit. A few days ago I purchased a bunch of bananas at a local supermarket. What will happen to this fruit if it’s not consumed? It will turn brown and then black and become rotten very quickly. Some types of fruit spoil at a faster rate than others, and some fruit lasts longer if refrigerated than left at room or outdoor temperature. But all natural fruit is prone to spoiling eventually.

The kind of spiritual fruit that Jesus desires to bring forth, by contrast, is intended to be “fruit that will last.” When the Holy Spirit changes your heart and softens it towards others, that is lasting change. And when you help a person to come to faith, you will be with that person forever in heaven.

The Pruning Experience

An inescapable implication of the metaphor of the grapevine, which was known well by everyone who lived in the Middle East twenty centuries ago (where grape-growing and wine-making were an important part of the local economy) is that vines need to be regularly pruned. After the harvest, the beautiful and lush leaves that take in

the sun and moisture and direct them to the grapes are no longer useful. To prepare for the next growing season, the vineyard keeper must prune those branches. If he doesn't, the future crop will be stunted. Cutting is a part of the process.

This has been recognized, since Jesus first spoke the words, as a clear message to us. Followers of the Lord—even those who are most “fruitful” and devoted—will at times experience the “cutting” and “pruning” experience. And it may hurt, it may be difficult. But it's necessary. Going through those pruning times—as some of us are doing right now—is not accidental, nor a sign of God's rejection. He uses the seasons of cutting and trials, just as He uses the seasons of sunshine and blessing. All of them work within us, if we stay vitally connected to our Vine. And going through pruning experiences can make us more fruitful in our impact upon others.

Bringing Forth a Harvest

I will close with this story that I hope will be of special encouragement to us whenever the circumstances in our life—health problems, family problems, financial problems, and all the rest—are difficult. A woman who was a college teacher chose to use her school breaks to catch up on her professional reading and her writing. She found it helpful to go to a favorite bed and breakfast in the countryside for a week at a time, usually once in May at the end of the academic year and again in September before the start of the next semester. One fall, as she took her daily walk on country lanes, she came to a beautiful meadow. It was lush with unmown grass and wildflowers of every imaginable color. It became her favorite spot, and she returned to it daily during her walks, leaning on the fencepost to soak in its beauty.

The next May she returned, and on her first morning walk she came to the meadow and found it terribly changed. Instead of grass and flowers she saw nothing but upturned dirt, uniformly brown and colorless. How sad, she thought, that my beautiful meadow has been ruined. The owner of the B&B later that day told her that the field had been sold and a farmer had plowed it and planted it. The writer

returned again in September, and once again the field had been transformed. But this time it was not only green but filled with corn ripening beautifully to become nourishing food.

The writer reflected on the lesson she had witnessed. The fallow field had looked beautiful from a distance, but it was unfruitful. The plowing had initially caused its beauty to be scarred by the deep cuts that pulled up all the grass and weeds and wildflowers. But hidden within the furrows of that seemingly ugly dirt were life-giving seeds. And given time and nourishment, they produced an even greater beauty: head-tall corn stalks waving in the wind bearing much fruit. She wrote down her thoughts as follows.

There have been times in my life when all seemed peaceful, like the fallow field, and I was content. But then there have been times when God's plow disturbed my comfort and disrupted my life. I didn't like it when it happened. But I now can see that the plowing and discomfort was for my ultimate good, and that He my gracious Farmer has brought forth in me a harvest that couldn't have been produced in any other way.

