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Sermons in this series
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- Part: 52 [Are you marked in the Ear and the Foot by the Good Shepherd?](#)
- Part: 51 [Blind Eyes Made to See by Jesus](#)
- Part: 50 [Listening to the Master](#)
- Part: 49 [Jesus the Evangelist](#)
- Part: 48 [Believers are Worshippers](#)
- Part: 47 [Are We Like the Woman at the Well?](#)
- Part: 46 [Snakes, Sinners and the Savior](#)
- Part: 45 [Starting Life Over Again](#)
- Part: 44 [What a Wonderful Change has been Wrought in Your Life](#)
- Part: 43 [DO YOU BELIEVE AND HAVE THIS LIFE?](#)
- Part: 42 [Triumphant Living](#)
- Part: 41 [Where Are You On The Spiritual Map of Your Life?](#)
- Part: 40 [Are You Enjoying an Endless, Overflowing, Victorious Life?](#)
- Part: 39 [How to Have the Endless Joy-Filled Life](#)
- Part: 38 [Jesus Is the Lamb of God?](#)
- Part: 37 [Jesus Is the Son of God](#)
- Part: 36 [Jesus in All the Gospels](#)
- Part: 35 [Hearing the Voice of Jesus](#)
- Part: 34 [ARE YOU READY TO STAND BEFORE CHRIST'S THRONE?](#)

Jesus: I Am the Vine



Part 23 (011118PM)

[Return to previous Page](#) | [Print](#)

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Why does it take so much effort on God's part to prune us constantly? Let me share a few insights from a grape arbor. That is what we called ours at home as I grew up in Michigan. We cultivated grapes for my mother's incredible grape jams, jellies, and juice.

- But we had learned the hard way about the mischievous nature of the rambling, rapid growing grape vines! In every way we are like those vines. Why? The biggest enemy of the grape is itself. Grapes love to grow and expand their territory.
- In fact they love to do everything but bear fruit, they must be pruned to do that! We are so much like the grape vine's tendency to grow so vigorously in every direction!

1. We like those vines have a lot of non-fruitful wood that must be cut away each year. We like the grapevines can become so dense in all our external leaf productions (ministry, work, family, athletics, amusements, investments, busyness, stress, anxieties, sins, etc.) that the sun (like the Son of God) cannot reach into the area where fruit should form.

2. We, left to ourselves, are just like a grape plant; we will always favor new expansion of our territory over more grapes (fruit for God).

3. What is the spiritual result? From a distance our lives look like incredibly green and healthy branches full of luxurious growth, and of impressive achievements. But to the Lord who stands up close, we have an under-whelming harvest of God glorifying eternal fruit!

The vinedresser. In ancient vineyards the vinedresser prunes the branches in two ways: he cuts away dead wood that can breed disease and insects, and he cuts away living tissue so that the life of the vine will not be so dissipated that the quality of the crop will be jeopardized. Sometimes, the vinedresser will even cut away whole bunches of grapes so that the rest of the crop will be of higher quality.

1. Your Heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you. Sometimes He cuts away the dead wood that might cause trouble; but often He cuts off the living tissue that is robbing you of spiritual vigor. How does the Father prune us?

2. Sometimes He simply uses the Word to convict and cleanse us. (The word translated "purge" in [John 15:2](#) is the same as "clean" in [John 13:10](#). See [Eph. 5:26-27](#).)

Our Heavenly Father is the pruner of the branches who seeks both quantity and quality. The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer would be to let him alone, let him have his own way. Because God loves us, He "prunes" us and encourages us to bear more fruit for His glory.

- Sometimes He must chasten us ([Heb. 12:1-11](#)). At the time, it hurts when He removes something precious from us; but as the "spiritual crop" is produced, we see that the Father knew what He was doing.
- But always our Father has to prune us so that the quality keeps up with the quantity. Left to itself, our branch might produce many clusters, but they will be inferior in quality. God is glorified by a bigger crop that is also a *better* crop.

We must remember that the branches do not eat the fruit: others do. We are not producing fruit to please ourselves but to serve others. Several different kinds of spiritual fruit are named in the Bible.

- One we win to Christ ([Rom. 1:13](#)) is a type of spiritual fruit.
- Growth in holiness and obedience is another type of fruit ([Rom. 6:22](#)).
- Stewardship is fruit from a dedicated life ([Rom. 15:28](#)).
- The fruit of the Spirit in [Gal. 5:22-23](#) is the lifestyle that glorifies God and makes Christ real to others.
- Good works of serving others is a fruit in an abiding life ([Col. 1:10](#)).

Part: 33 Do Troubles Push you Toward God?

Part: 32 Are You Pushed Toward God?

Part: 31 Is It Chastening or Pruning?

Part: 30 Our Father the VINEDRESSER

Part: 29 Fruit Bearing 101

Part: 28 Are You Cleansed, Clipped and Christ-like?

Part: 27 Secrets of Fruitfulness-2

Part: 26 Secrets of Fruitfulness-1

Part: 25 A Life Useful for Jesus

Part: 24 Starting Over in Newness in Jesus

Part: 23 Jesus: I Am the Vine

Part: 22 Secrets of the VINE

Part: 21 How to Get Christ's Well Done

Part: 20 How To Walk Through The Valley Of Death's Shadow

Part: 19 The Race and the Crown

Part: 18 Finishing Well With Christ's WELL DONE

Part: 17 I Go To Prepare a Place

Part: 16 In My Fathers House

Part: 15 Who is the LORD - Jehovah or Allah?

Part: 14 Are You Secure for Eternity?

Part: 13 Mormonism Is the Wrong Way to God

Part: 12 Are You Ready to Die?

Part: 11 Jesus: I AM the Resurrection and the Life

Part: 10 Is Your Cup Overflowing

Part: 9 Following Jesus as My Good Shepherd in the Hard Times of Life!

Part: 8 Is Your Head Oiled?

Part: 7 Following Jesus As My Good Shepherd

Part: 6 I AM THE DOOR: Entering Life Through Jesus

Part: 5 Have You Given Your Life to Jesus?

Part: 4 Jesus: I AM the Bread of Life

Part: 3 Jesus: I am the LIGHT in the Wilderness

Part: 2 Jesus: I AM the Light to follow

Part: 1 Jesus: I AM the Light to Trust

- Words offered in worship and praise to God, coming from our hearts and lips, is a wonderful fruit to the glory of God (Heb. 13:15).

A true ^[1] branch, united with the vine, will always bear fruit. Not every branch bears a bumper crop, just as not every field has a bumper harvest (Matt. 13:8, 23), but there is always fruit where there is life. If there is no fruit, the branch is worthless and it is cast away and burned. The Lord isn't teaching here that true believers can lose their salvation, for this would contradict what He taught in John 6:37 and 10:27-30. We shouldn't build a theological doctrine on a parable or allegory. Here Christ's one main truth is the fruitful life of the believer. Just as an unfruitful branch is useless, so an unfruitful believer is useless; and both must be dealt with. It is a tragic thing for a once-fruitful believer to backslide and lose his privilege of fellowship and service. If anything, John 15:6 describes divine discipline rather than eternal destiny. "There is [for believers] a sin unto death" (1 John 5:16).

How do we make the application of this passage to believers? The answer ^[2] comes in two parts. First, a clearer translation of the Greek word *airo*, rendered in John 15 as "take away," would be "take up" or "lift up." We find accurate renderings of *airo*, for example, when the disciples "took up" twelve baskets of food after the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:20), when Simon was forced to "bear" Christ's cross (Matthew 27:32), and when John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God who "takes away" the sin of the world (John 1:29). In fact, in both the Bible and in Greek literature, *airo* never means "cut off." Therefore, when some Bibles render the word as "takes away" or "cut off" in John 15, it is an unfortunate interpretation rather than a clear translation. "Lifts up," suggest an image of a vinedresser leaning over to lift up a branch. But why?

Our First Lesson of the Vine ^[3] **Of The Vine:** *If your life consistently bears no fruit, God will intervene to discipline you. Lift up...clean...* I have never read John 15 in the same way again. For the Christian, sin is like dirt covering the grape leaves. Air and light can't get in. The branch languishes, and no fruit develops. How does our Vinedresser lift us from mud and misery? How does He move our branch from barren to beautiful so we can start filling up our basket? The answer to this question is the first secret of the vine. It's All Up To You, Once believers understand God's motive in discipline, an astonishing truth dawns: *The discipline doesn't have to continue! It's all up to me. I will only experience pain as long as I hang on to my sin.* If you're still wondering whether you are in a season of discipline, ask yourself this question: *Can I look back over my walk with God and see very clearly that a sinful behavior I used to be caught up in is no longer an issue? Are there thoughts, attitudes, or habits that used to dominate my life but don't anymore?* If you can answer yes, you're moving forward and upward with God. If you can't, your grape harvest basket is probably empty and you are undoubtedly being disciplined. I recommend that you now try to understand what degree of discipline God might be using to get your attention. Note Hebrews 12 with me. There are stages of God's chastening in a believer's life.

1. **Stage 1: Rebuke** – *"My son, do not...be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him" (v.5).* We hear God's rebuke, even though we don't always choose to respond. God can make Himself heard in many ways: a prick of our conscience, a timely word from another person, a Scripture, the preaching of God's Word, or conviction by the Holy Spirit. (Do you see how wonderful and kind it is of God to use so many methods to get our attention and steer us away from peril?)

2. **Stage 2: Chasten** – *"For whom the Lord loves He chastens" (v. 5).* In other places in the Bible, the word *chastening* is used interchangeably with discipline. But in our text we find a specific use that shows a more serious degree of discipline. Chastening is something you feel as emotional anxiety, frustration, or distress. What used to bring you joy now doesn't. Pressures increase at work, at home, in your health or finance. Many Christians bump along in this level of discipline, yet fail to read the signs. They feel unfulfilled at church, critical of their Christian friends, and "on the outs" with God. When they pick up their Bible, it feels like a lead weight instead of a welcome relief. Their relationship with the Lord seems blighted by a sadness or lethargy they can't quite trace. If any of these symptoms sound familiar, you don't need to go to church more or try to read your Bible with a better attitude. You need to look for ongoing sin in your life, the dirt crusting over your leaves and cutting you off from God's best. If you don't respond, love will compel your Father to take more drastic measures.

3. **Stage 3: Scourge** – *"And scourges every son whom He receives" (v. 6).* To scourge is to whip, to inflict punishment. It's the same word the Gospels use to describe what the Romans did to Jesus just before they crucified Him. Not a pretty picture! In fact, for the word *scourge* you could substitute *cause-excruciating pain*. What percentage of Christians do you think have experienced scourging? It may shock you to read that God scourges "every son." That means you have most likely already been scourge in your life.

WHAT STOPS GOOD PEOPLE FROM ^[4] CLEANING UP THEIR ACT? Do you recognize yourself any of these misguided voices?

- "The pain and negative circumstances in my life are the results of natural consequences or fate. They're not connected to my choices."
- "If God does discipline me somehow, it would probably be a one-time deal. He's much too forgiving to impose escalating consequences or to intentionally cause me pain just to motivate me to stop sinning."
- "Let's be honest. The enjoyment I get from my so-called sin outweighs any spiritual benefit I'd get from stopping. And anyway, my sins aren't really hurting anybody."
- "I simply can't help myself. This problem goes back to my childhood. So why wouldn't God extend grace rather than impose discipline?"
- "Just because I sin doesn't mean I can't do something for God. Hey, God uses crooked sticks. We can't all be Billy Graham, you know."
- "It's not a sin. It's just a weakness, part of my personality, something I struggle with."

If you recognize yourself in any of these misconceptions, do you see what you're really saying? *My sin doesn't have consequences. God won't pursue this. I like my sin too much to quit. I've convinced myself that I can't quit. My sin won't diminish my effectiveness.* And finally. *My problem isn't even a sin.*

THE JOYFUL TURNING The Bible word for his unforgettable, hope-filled change of

direction is *repentance*. Repentance is a turning away from the sin that ails you to the bounty God promises you. Neither is repentance a one-time act. It is a lifestyle, an ongoing commitment to keep putting aside our rebellion and receive God's forgiveness. Some sins leave us in such bondage that we need ongoing help and accountability. No one knows this truth better than those who have overcome serious addictions and brokenness in their pasts. *Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.* (John 15:2) God's strategy for coaxing a greater harvest out of His branches is not the one you and I would prefer. His plan is to prune, which means to thin, to reduce, to cut off.

The Second Lesson of The Vine: *If your life bears some fruit, God will intervene to prune you* – the Vinedresser's secret for more is...less. Are you ready for a troubling truth that, once grasped, will free you to view the trials you're now facing in a new light? Even change how you feel about them and reward you with a beautiful harvest for God? Then you're ready for the second secret of the vine. Recently, I read a gardening report that explained why: Because of the grape's tendency to grow so vigorously, a lot of wood must be cut away each year. Grapevines can become so dense that the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form. Left to itself, a grape plant will always favor new growth over more grapes. The result? From a distance, luxurious growth, an impressive achievement. Up close, an underwhelming harvest.

PROFILES IN PRUNING ^[5] In the vineyard, an expert pruner applies his skills in four specific ways: to remove growth that is dead or dying; to make sure sunlight can get to all fruit-bearing branches; to increase the size and quality of the fruit; and to encourage new fruit to develop.

The Third Lesson of The Vine ^[6] : *If your life bears a lot of fruit, God will invite you to abide more deeply with Him.* His purpose is not that you will do more for Him but that you will choose to be more with Him. Only by abiding can you enjoy the most rewarding friendship with God and experience the greatest abundance for His glory. Abiding is all about the most important friendship of your life. Abiding doesn't measure how much you know about your faith or your Bible. In abiding, you seek, long for, thirst for, wait for, see, know, love, hear, and respond to ...a person. More abiding means more of God in your life, more of Him in your activities, thoughts, and desires.

In this text ^[7] , remaining in Christ is for those who are *in Christ already*. So abiding refers to conscious decisions or choices in living the Christian life. So the burning describes the believer's works that are burned if these works are not of Christ, and it is the Christian's role as a fruit bearer and not his salvation that was discussed in the passage.

Lot would be an example here, as Arthur W. Pink points out in his presentation of this evidence.

"He was out of fellowship with the Lord, he ceased to bear fruit to His glory, and his dead works were all burned up in Sodom; yet he himself was saved!" ^[8]

Ray Stedman writes of this passage,

"When our Lord says: Abide in me He is talking about the will, about the choices, the decisions we make. We must decide to do things which expose ourselves to him and keep ourselves in contact with him. This is what it means to abide in him. We have been placed into Christ by the Holy Spirit. Now we must choose to maintain that relationship by the decisions we make—decisions to expose ourselves to his Word in order to learn about him, and to relate to him in prayer wherein we converse with him. Decisions to relate to other believers in Body Life experiences; that is, bearing one another's burdens and confessing our faults and sharing in fellowship with one another, wherein we learn about and see Christ in one another. All of this is designed to relate to him—Abide in me. If we do that, we are fulfilling this active, necessary decision of the will to obey his Word, to do what he says, and to stay in touch with him." ^[9]

How much does God want to remove pride ^[10] in our life? Immensely! The Bible says, "God resists the proud. ..." James 4:6 NKJV) and "These six things the LORD hates. ...a proud look" (Prov. 6:16-17 NKJV). Pride was Nebuchadnezzar surveying his kingdom and saying, "look what I've done." The result of pride was Nebuchadnezzar on his hands and knees eating grass in a cow pasture.

- Pride is an acid that turns the finest fruit bitter.
- Pride is a shallow and superficial weed that grows in all soils, without need of water or care. It consumes and destroys every living thing it overshadows.
- Pride is a swelling of the heart filled with ego and self-importance.
- Pride raises you above others until you look down on them.
- Pride is the basis of racism that divides the church and America. There is no white church, black church, brown church, or yellow church in Scripture. There is only the blood-bought church of Jesus Christ.
- Pride is a cancer that rots the soul. A man infected with pride needs nothing...not even God!

Why does God hate pride? Because sin is man's declaration of independence of God.

- Do you want ^[11] God's blessing upon your life? Then hunger and thirst for righteousness! Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 NKJV).
- Do you want God's protection? Live a righteous and pure life! "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous," wrote the psalmist "and His ears are open to their cry" (Ps. 34:15 NKJV).
- Do you want God to provide for your children? Live a godly life! In Psalm 37:25, the psalmist assures us, "I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread" (NKJV).
- Do you want God to answer your prayers? Live righteously! "The LORD is far from the wicked," Solomon wrote, "but He hears the prayer of the righteous" (Prov. 15:29 NKJV). James assures us that the prayer of a righteous man avails much (5:16), and the psalmist adds a warning: "If I regard iniquity [sin] in my heart The Lord will not

hear" (Ps. 66:18 NKJV).

- I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE (6:35, 41, 48, 51) – Jesus is all I need to BE SATISFIED;
- I AM THE LIGHT OF WORLD (8:12) - Jesus is all I need to LIGHT my PATH;
- I AM THE DOOR OF life to my SHEEP (10: 7,9) - Jesus is all I need to get into God's Family,
- I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD (10:11, 14) - Jesus is all I need to make it through life and get HOME,
- I AM THE RESURRECTION AND LIFE (11:25) - Jesus is all I need to conquer death,
- I AM THE WAY, TRUTH & LIFE (14:6) - Jesus is all I need to not get lost

I AM THE TRUE VINE (15:1) - Jesus is all I need to be fruitful to the last day of my life, apart from Him is only continual withering.

- Jesus says I am the Vine, your source of life and health. The state of your health is all in my hands.
- I will provide for you living grace, enduring declining life grace, and dying grace. Each just when you need them!
- If the vine speaks of all of life as one growing season, then we should get more fruit filled the older we get (ala Psalm 92), if it is many seasons then life is a succession of growing /pruning /bearing /resting and then growing/pruning...
- Believers are **ABIDING IN JESUS WHO IS MY SUPPLY OF ALL I EVER NEED.**

Bruce Wilkinson's helpful Chart

How do you know It's Happening?	Pain	Pain
Why is it happening?	You're doing Something wrong	You're doing something right
What is your Level of Fruitfulness?	No fruit (represented by Basket 1)	Fruit (represented by Basket 2)
What is the Vinedresser's Desire?	Fruit (represented by Basket 2)	More Fruit (represented by Basket 3)
What needs to go?	Sin	Self
How should You feel?	Guilty, sad	Relief, trust
What is the Right response?	Repentance (stop your Sinning)	Release (give God your permission)
When does It stop?	When we Stop sinning	When God is finished

The branches. Many of the images of Christ and the believer given in Scripture emphasize this important concept of *union and communion*: the body and its members (1 Cor. 12), the bride and the Bridegroom (Eph. 5:25–33), the sheep and the Shepherd (John 10). A member of the body cut off from the body would die. The sooner we as believers discover that we are but branches, the better we will relate to the Lord; for we will know our own weakness and confess our need for His strength. Of course the key to this passage is the word *abide*: it is used eleven times in John 15:1–11 ("continue" in John 15:9 and "remain" in John 15:11). What does it mean to "abide"? It means to keep in fellowship with Christ so that His life can work in and through us to produce fruit. This certainly involves the Word of God and the confession of sin so that nothing hinders our communion with Him (John 15:3). It also involves obeying Him because we love Him (John 15:9–10). This abiding relationship is natural to the branch and the vine, but it must be cultivated in the Christian life. It is not automatic. Abiding in Christ demands worship, meditation on God's Word, prayer, sacrifice, and service—but what a joyful experience it is! Once you have begun to cultivate this deeper communion with Christ, you have no desire to return to the shallow life of the careless Christian.

[1] Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books) 1997.

[2] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 21-35.

[3] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 39-48.

[4] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 50-59.

[5] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 50-59.

[6] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 50-59.

[7] Adapted from comments by James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John Volume 4*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999, p. 166-170.

[8] Pink, *Expositions of the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 408.

[9] Ray G. Stedman, *Secrets of the Spirit* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1975), 81.

[10] John Hagee, *His Glory Revealed*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, p. 25-28.

[11] John Hagee, *His Glory Revealed*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, p. 46-47.

[12] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 96-103.

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