

MONDAY 7/22

Read John 15:1

John 15 is the primary passage we'll be using to explore the divine rhythm of life God wove into the fabric of creation. In John 15, Jesus uses the image of a vine to help us understand the pattern for a fruitful life and the way our relationship to God empowers that life.

One thing we share in common with a vine is that we are both expected to be productive. We are given a desire to do something meaningful with our lives. Children of God channel this desire toward being fruitful for God's Kingdom. We want to serve the Lord because we love Him. When we meet the Father, we want to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

In order to live a fruitful life, we must adopt fruitful practices. We must develop disciplines that enable us to serve for the long haul. A fruitful life is about being faithful throughout your journey, not just for a season of your life. Fruitfulness for a lifetime requires endurance and perseverance.

In order to have the stamina for the journey, we must practice rest. We must rest both physically and spiritually. The spiritual term for rest is "abiding," which means "to remain one with Jesus". It means to walk closely, in intimate relationship with Him. By abiding, we allow Jesus to shape our lives, fill us, and guide us. This relationship will inspire us to grow in the likeness of Christ.

In revisiting the image of the vine, we see that growth toward Christ-likeness requires that we be pruned. A gardener will prune a vine by cutting back the unproductive branches. Pruning is what sends a vine into a state of rest and allows it to garner the resources needed for new growth. By walking closely with Jesus, we open ourselves up to this kind of pruning. We give Jesus the right to cut back the unfruitful practices we have developed in our lives. This is what leads to growth, which, as we faithfully yield to this process over and over again, will empower us to become more like Jesus.

Prayer: *"Lord, I want to live faithfully in this rhythm so that I may produce fruit for You. Amen."*

TUESDAY 7/23

John 15:2

Pruning encourages healthy growth. By pruning, you remove what is unhealthy and dying. By doing this, a vine is able to pour its resources into good growth for the plant. Pruning removes that which is dead and creates the opportunity for new life to sprout in its place.

The reality is we are all in need of pruning. We all have developed unhealthy patterns of behavior that are not reflective of Jesus. We're all prone to particular sinful tendencies. These manifest themselves in the forms of biases, short tempers, bitterness, and judgmentalism toward those who are not like us. Some of these behaviors pop up in particularly stressful times in our lives. Periods of intense fruit-bearing often expose frailties within the vine. These places will tend to wither in such times of trial.

Intense times often bring out the worst in us, too. What we need is the touch of the Great Gardener. We need God to prune the unhealthy patterns and tendencies in our lives. We need Him to trim the rough edges that we have developed in stressful seasons. I wonder--Will you invite our Father, the

Great Gardener, to prune back the unhealthy parts of your life?

The beautiful thing is when we give ourselves into God's care in such a way, we can expect that His work will result in greater fruitfulness in our lives. So allow Him to reveal in you what needs pruning and trust that the work He does will lead to more fruitfulness than you could ever imagine.

Prayer: *"Father, rid me of all that is unhealthy so that I can produce real fruit for You. Amen."*

WEDNESDAY 7/24

John 15:3

Speaking to the idea of pruning, Jesus says that His disciples are being pruned by His teachings. Here Jesus identifies one of the primary means of pruning: God's Word.

The Bible records God's speaking to us. God still speaks through the Bible today. The scriptures shine a spotlight on our lives, often revealing what we would rather keep hidden. The Word moves beyond merely exposing our faults, but goes on to lead us toward God's redemptive power at work in our lives. Jesus' teachings are a great example of this.

The beauty of Jesus' teachings is that they go far beyond just exposing our flaws. Jesus' teachings lead us toward wholeness in that they invite us to receive grace that is able to meet our brokenness and lead toward healing. In Jesus' hands, what once led to death can now lead to life. It is this process of transformation that begins to shape our lives into His likeness.

For Jesus' disciples, His teachings are to be that which shape their lives. Jesus teaches us how to love, forgive, and serve. He gives us a tangible picture of God's values being lived out in the world. He shows us what our lives should look like. Of course, holding our lives up against that of Jesus is humbling, to say the least. The good news is that God often speaks in the discrepancy between the two. He shows us what needs to be pruned. He invites us to come to Him in order to be changed.

Pruning allows you to shape a plant. You can train a shrub to take a certain shape. Under Jesus' teachings, we too can be shaped into something new. The question is: Into what are we being shaped? Are we being molded into the image of Jesus Himself? Our culture says that the best thing we can do is be the best version of ourselves. Jesus says the greatest thing we can do is to become like Him.

Prayer: *"Jesus, may Your words wash over me and give proper shape to my life. Amen."*

THURSDAY 7/25

Hebrews 12:1-2

The writer of Hebrews uses the image of a race to talk about the Christian life. He challenges Christians running their races of faith to throw off the sin that entangles them. If the goal is to win the race, we must make preparations in order to win. That means tossing aside the things that prevent us from running the race freely.

We all have sins that prevent us from running our races with the intensity that we would like. The question is: Are we willing to do what it takes to throw off those sins? We must allow God to expose what is hindering us so that they can be addressed. We turn to Jesus who both frees us from the chains of sin and empowers our transformation. Confession is a powerful tool that often breaks the power of sin's claim upon us.

I want you to notice that while the author calls us to acknowledge the entanglements of sin, he tells us to focus on Jesus. It's easy to fixate on our brokenness, but our focus is on Jesus, the One who is able to bring our faith to its fulfillment. Jesus is the One who has run His race faithfully. He is also the One who can also help us run our own race.

During the men's 400-meter race at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, sprinter Derek Redmond, while coming around the final stretch, tore his hamstring. He was lying on the track in tears when he spotted his dad in the stands. Jim, his dad, leapt out of the stands and past security to get to his son. In one of the most memorable moments in Olympic history, the two ended up finishing the race together.

Prayer: *"Jesus, I know I don't run alone. You will enable me to get to the finish line. Amen."*

FRIDAY 7/26

Hebrews 12:3-6

Being pruned isn't easy, but it is a privilege. It is a privilege of being a child of God. Again, that doesn't make the process of being changed fun; in fact, it can be quite exasperating at times.

When we are frustrated by the process of being pruned in our lives, we need not lose heart. Again, we turn to Jesus and the example He laid before us. Jesus endured incredible hostility. He was beaten and ridiculed. Our struggle to eradicate sin from our lives, while challenging, hasn't cost us anything compared to what Jesus endured.

The writer of Hebrews says the work of being pruned is a privilege in that it confirms our identity as God's children. As such, pruning should not be received as punishment. Pruning leads to freedom and wholeness. It is love that motivates God to trim the unhealthy practices in our lives. God is spoken of here as a parent who identifies an unhealthy behavior in his or her child. A loving parent would never leave that child to his or her own devices. He would try to address it because he would be aware of the hardships that will come later in his child's life if he or she continues in that behavior.

Disciplining your child isn't easy. It takes more than pointing it out to inspire change, but as a parent, you enter into it because you have a vision in mind of what you want your child to become. You want him or her to reach full potential.

God has the same in mind for us. He wants us to reach the image of His Son. He will work on us and in us as we are formed into that image. I can't help but think of the image of a potter as he looks at a fresh lump of clay. The potter can see quite clearly what the clay can become. He begins his work carving, cutting, and shaping the pieces here and there, and eventually, the clay becomes a work of art. We are privileged to be the clay in the hands of the Master.

Prayer: *"God, thank You for loving me and for shaping my life. Amen."*

SATURDAY 7/27

Hebrews 12:7-9

Growing up with my friends, we got into trouble together on more than one occasion. Looking back, it's interesting to note the difference between being disciplined by my friends' parents versus my own parents. We might be reprimanded by a friend's parents, but we were sent home for the real discipline. Why did my friends' parents treat me differently than they did their children? Because I wasn't theirs! I didn't belong to them. As God's children, we belong to Him. We are His responsibility, and He takes seriously His responsibility to shape us into what we can become. The Father will use anything in our lives to help move us toward the image of His Son.

This is true even of our trials. God will use even our difficulties as opportunities for us to be transformed. This isn't to say that God places trials in our lives in order to teach us; sometimes bad things just happen in our lives. Other times, our poor decisions lead to consequences that we must face. Whatever the cause, these unwelcome hardships are opportunities to be changed.

In James 1:2, we are told to look at our trials as occasions for joy because we know that God is working in them. Now, that's easier said than done, but what James wants the believer to do is to realize that God can and will use our worst seasons to grow us. No hardship is wasted by God. If we allow Him, God can teach us through our trials so that we come out something different on the other side. This isn't to say that it's always a fun process, but it does lead to fruitfulness and the deep joy that comes from knowing you have been faithful.

Prayer: *"Holy Spirit, be my teacher in life. Use my experiences to lead me to fruitfulness. Amen."*

SUNDAY 7/28

Hebrews 12:10-12

God's discipline or pruning leads us toward holiness. It is through this process of cutting back the unfruitful parts of our lives so that healthier practices can grow that we are shaped into the image of Jesus.

What stands out to me here is that this passage focuses on the long-term benefit of discipline. In other words, discipline isn't fun in the moment, but it produces something of great value in the long run. The believer has to trust that while being pruned is often an uncomfortable season, God has something greater in store for us if we allow Him to change us.

This process is the work of sanctification. Sanctification is the grace that allows us to grow in holiness. This grace draws out our imperfections and refines them by fire so that what comes out the other side is pure. This work of sanctification is something in which both we and God participate together. God is the One who works to heal and transform. Our work is to yield to Him as He works.

If we are faithful in this process, we will see God continue to bear more and more fruit in our lives. As we bear fruit, God will prune so as to inspire greater growth in us. This growth leads to even more fruitfulness. This reminds me of a story told by M. H. Schubert.

A group of fishermen from the Scottish highlands gathered for tea and discussed the day's catch. As a waitress set down a cup of tea, a hand accidentally knocked it against the wall, leaving an ugly stain. One of the guests got up, went to the wall, and began sketching around the blemish with a crayon. What emerged was a stag with magnificent antlers. The man was Sir Edwin Landseer, England's foremost painter of animals. If an artist can transform an unsightly stain into a beautiful masterpiece, think what God can do with our sins. He absolves them, and in their place, refashions us toward full maturity.

Prayer: *"Eternal God, make me a masterpiece so that I can bear much fruit for Your glory. Amen."*