

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

BY

Calvary Chapel Outreach Fellowship

Lesson 27

An Abiding Relationship with Christ

By

Brian Brodersen

Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa

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Let's turn to [John 15:1-11](#).

- 1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.
- 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.
- 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.
- 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.
- 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.
- 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.
- 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.
- 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.
- 9 As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.
- 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.
- 11 These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.

Let's pray.

Lord, once again we are asking that You would speak to us. Lord, how good it is to just come, sit, be refreshed, and hear from You. Lord, our desire is that as we would stand behind this pulpit, and that each one of us would be the oracles of God, not speaking our own minds or thoughts but speaking Your heart. As we look at this great portion of Scripture, we pray that You would speak to us about what it is to bear fruit and what it is to abide in Christ. Help us now we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The grapevine, with its many branches and abundance of fruit, was a symbol of the nation of Israel. This symbol was stamped on their coins, carved on their synagogues, and even carved on the door of the temple in Jerusalem. It was a familiar picture to every Jew of what God had in mind for the nation. But as we all know, Israel failed to bring forth both the quantity and the quality of fruit that God was desiring through them and so He set them aside.

Now Jesus says to this small band of disciples, "I am the true vine. You are the branches." And then He says in essence, "By abiding in Me, you will bring forth fruit. You will bring forth that which delights the heart of God and fulfills His intended purposes" (cf. [John 15:4-5](#)).

Here in our text, Jesus reveals to us the secret of a fruitful life. What we want to talk about is the secret of a fruitful life. I am not going to try to do an exposition of the eleven verses and look at

each and every aspect of these verses. Jesus, of course, is speaking parabolically. In every parable there is generally one main thing the Lord wants to communicate. And I think in this parable it is pretty clear—He wants to communicate the vital necessity of staying as connected to Him as we possibly can. That is what we want to consider in this passage.

There are three things I want to concentrate on from the text. The first thing is the definition of “fruit.” Jesus is talking about bearing fruit. This is what He desires, so we want to really try to grasp what it is that He is referring to. Secondly, we want to consider how fruit is born. And then thirdly, we want to look at how fruit is increased.

First of all, what is fruit? That is what He is talking about here. That is what He is stressing. “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away. Every branch in Me that bears fruit...” All the way through, bearing fruit is the emphasis.

As pastors, we often make the mistake of thinking that fruit is a reference primarily to the number of converts that we made under our ministries. That it is the number of people attending our church services, the number of churches that we have been instrumental in planting, or any other number of things like that. And although I think that is an aspect of fruit that we will talk about a bit later, I do not think that is primarily what Jesus is talking about. I do not think that is really what He had in His mind first and foremost when He was talking about bearing fruit, bearing more fruit, and bearing much fruit.

If we were to ask Him for a definition of what He meant, I think what He was really referring to is something much more basic and fundamental. I think He was indicating that His life, His attributes, and His character would flow from us just as the sap flows from the vine into the branches and brings forth fruit.

So, I would say that the first definition of fruit, as Jesus was talking about it, would really be “Christ manifested through us.” Another way to describe it would be “personal godliness.” I do not want to overstate the case because I think that the problems we see in the ministry are probably a minority, at least I hope so. But it does seem that we have come to a stage in the ministry, as a body of churches called Calvary Chapel, where we have maybe to some degree missed the main point of personal godliness. Sometimes we even see people who have no regard whatsoever for personal godliness; yet, they are having an element of success or prosperity in their ministry. Even though they have no regard for personal godliness, they are talking about all the fruit: “Look at the fruit that is being born.”

I will never forget a situation that occurred a couple of years ago. There was a guy who was having great success in the ministry. He was building a new church and more people than ever were attending. The messages seemed to be more powerful; yet, at the same time he was having an affair and he was a drunk. When he was challenged, his response was: “Hey, we are bearing fruit.” No, he was not bearing fruit because first and foremost fruit is personal godliness.

There are four aspects that I want to consider regarding personal godliness. Remember that Jesus is saying, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” The picture is whatever the vine is, the branch is going to produce in fruit. So if Christ is the vine, then the production of fruit from us—the branches—is really going to be His life manifested through us. What do we see, first and foremost, when we look at Jesus? I think the very first thing that we would probably have to say in consideration of the life of Christ is that Jesus was love. He was loving. He was full of love for people. Jesus was not aloof or detached from people. Jesus loved people, not theoretically, but practically. It is easy to say, “I love you guys” in theory. But what about practically?

I was involved this past weekend with a church where there has been a resignation and just a lot of really bad things have happened in this fellowship over the past couple of years. In the course of events, the pastor had ended up resigning and so forth. The assistant got up and said to the congregation, “Pastor *So and So* wants you to know he really loves you.” I just think if he really loved them he would not have done all this stuff that he has done and dragged them through the whole thing.

That is what I mean. Sometimes we talk about loving, but it is more theoretical than actual. It is more theoretical than practical. When you look at Jesus, He really loved people. He did not see people as a commodity. He did not see people as a means to a greater end. He loved people for who they were. He loved them because they were precious to Him. I think if we want to consider what it is to bear fruit, this is where we have to begin our consideration: do we love people? Do we love God’s people? Do we really care about them? Do we see that that is what the ministry is all about?

I remember years ago when I was an intern at Costa Mesa with Pastor Chuck Smith. He would call us in once in a while to have a little pastors’ meeting with us. A problem that occurs over and over again is that there are tons of people, there are all kinds of needs, and the pastors quite often cannot be found because they are busy studying. Pastor Chuck would often bring up the question: “What are you guys in the ministry for? What is your goal? What is your object?” And of course, it was to minister to God’s people. But every time a ministry opportunity came up, we seemed to be saying, “I am too busy for that. I have got to study right now. Please do not call me. Call somebody else.”

We can forget so easily that the ministry is about loving people. Preaching is an important thing, obviously. Teaching the Bible is vital to any ministry, but you can sort of undermine what you say by how you treat people. How you deal with people and the attitude that you demonstrate toward them is vital. People always knew one thing about Jesus—they knew that He loved them. And if we are really bearing fruit, I think God’s people are going to see that in our lives. They are going to see that their pastor is interested in them and he cares about them.

You guys have all had this experience. We have all had it. There is nothing worse than talking to somebody that you really want to talk to, but you sense as you are talking to them that they do not really want to talk to you because they are looking away. “What were you saying? Uh-huh. Right.” They are looking all around and you know that they really would rather be talking to somebody else. Sometimes that happens at conferences. I have talked to people over the years who have come and said, “When I talk to my pastor I just feel like he is not really interested in anything I have to say. He seems to be distracted. He does not really look at me. He is always looking away. Then he just sort of dismisses what I say and runs off looking for the next person.”

That is just an example of what can happen when we lose perspective on what Jesus is really talking about and what it is to bear fruit. Personal godliness is going to manifest itself, first of all, in love.

Secondly, as we consider Jesus, we would of course all agree that Jesus was holy. He said, “I always do those things that please the Father” (cf. [John 8:29](#)). It is so easy to get caught up in ministry and making sure that you are getting the right message out to everybody else, that you can neglect your own personal development. You can just overlook your own need to increase in holiness and become more and more like the Lord. Sometimes in our quest to be relevant, we compromise holiness. I think there is a lot of that going on in the church today.

I have an interesting article here from the *Times*. The title of the article is, “Fear in Church?” Pray for England.

England’s first match against Sweden is Sunday, kicking off at 10:30 a.m. U.K. time. The Church of England, realizing that soccer is a religion unto itself, sent an email to the diocese throughout the country, advising that they arranged to televise the game for parishioners, and also approved changing the time for services. So Saint James Church in London will screen the game and cut short its customary Sunday service to make way for St. Michael Owen. The church also will allow parishioners to bring their own beer. [Here is a church spokesman]—“It is part of our way to show that Christians are not complete weirdos who sit in the monastery and never have any fun.” Vicar Andrew Boggin told the national public radio, “Smoking, swearing and verbal abuse of the opposition will not be allowed.” In other words, the Swedes cannot smoke, swear, or cuss at you. They are the opposition and that will not be allowed, according to the Vicar. Churches in England will be competing for attendance with pubs and restaurants which have been granted permission by the high court to open and begin selling alcohol at 7 a.m. during the World Cup.

In our quest to be relevant, sometimes we compromise holiness. And I know that there are some of you who are a bit inclined to drift maybe a little more toward that seeker model that emphasizes relevance. I will tell you this—the Anglicans invented relevance. If you want to see where it leads, just go live in England for a few years and visit the Anglican churches. It is horrible. It is pathetic. We do not need to go there because what makes a difference in people’s lives is not that I am so relevant that they think I am cool and they cannot help but want to be a Christian. What makes a difference is the life of God shining through the Christian. Holiness is what we see in the life of Christ and that would certainly be an aspect of bearing fruit.

Thirdly, we can very clearly see humility in Jesus. If there was ever anybody on the planet that could have been on an ego trip, it was Jesus. He was the epitome of humility. He was utterly and completely humble.

We see that demonstration of humility in John 13. Remember there at the supper when He took the towel, girded Himself, and He began to wash the feet of the disciples. They did not understand what He was doing. Peter said, “Lord, what are You doing? You cannot do this.” Jesus said, “You do not understand what I am doing now, but you will understand later. You call Me Master and Lord and you are right because that is who I am. But if I, your Master and Lord, have done this for you, then you ought to do it for one another” (cf. [John 13:6-7](#); [13-14](#)).

Peter wrote in [1 Peter 5:5](#) about submitting to one another and he said, “And be clothed with humility.” I am certain that as he penned that he had in his mind the night when Jesus took that towel and girded Himself. A literal translation of “be clothed in humility” is “put on the costume of a slave.”

I think sometimes we lose sight of what a minister is. I was thinking about even the term “prime minister.” Prime Minister today denotes a person of importance. That is a person who is to be

admired and a position to be aspired to. But originally the prime minister was the chief servant of the rule. And of course, that is the meaning of minister—a servant.

What slave had anything to be proud of? It is totally inconsistent with who we are to manifest any arrogance because it is just so contrary to the character of our Lord. And so there is going to be humility in a true servant.

Fourthly, there is going to be grace. Jesus overflowed with grace. He was gracious. Think of Jesus in contrast to the other leaders of the day. Think of Jesus and that contrast in the eyes of somebody like Matthew, for example. Matthew was a tax collector. He was among the most despised people in all the land. The rabbis actually taught that very few people were beyond redemption. However tax collectors, being traitors, were among the few that were beyond redemption. The tax collector had betrayed his people and he was serving the enemy. I can just imagine that as Matthew sat at his tax booth and collected taxes, whenever any of the rabbis passed by, they would have probably spit his way. They would have uttered or maybe muttered curses under their breath. They would have pointed in his direction with a condemning finger. The last thing Matthew would have ever thought by the impression being given by these guys was that there was any possible redemption for him.

But Jesus was obviously entirely different. I imagine that Jesus occasionally ministered near to where Matthew was stationed. I would imagine that at times Matthew overheard some of what Jesus was saying, or even maybe observed His interaction with people. Matthew probably began to think: “That rabbi is different. There is something about Him. I feel like I could approach Him. I feel like I could talk to Him. I feel like if I were to come to Him, He probably would not condemn me.” And then suddenly what happens? One day he is sitting there, collecting taxes, and Jesus walks by and says, “Follow Me.” I know it was that grace that exuded from Christ that drew Matthew to the Lord.

When Jesus was talking about bearing fruit I think that He had these four things in mind: love, holiness, humility and grace. He is talking about this being the overflow of our lives.

As I said and I want to repeat it—I think sometimes we get so caught up in the mechanics of the ministry, trying to be a success, that we can even be competing with the church in the next city. We get so consumed with all of this stuff, that we forget the very basic fundamental things of just the life of Christ manifesting itself through us. That is what the Lord is looking for. That is what He is delighting in. Unfortunately, we often do not see that love. There is not that great concern for holiness; there is not that humility; there is not that grace.

I think that the term “fruit” would be a reference to good works. Now we all know we are saved by grace. There is no question about that.

8 But by grace we have been saved through faith, that not of
ourselves; It is a gift of God,
9 not of works lest any man should boast.
10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the
good works, that God before ordained that we should walk in.
(cf. [Ephesians 2:8-10](#))

Sometimes I get the feeling that we give the impression to our congregations that the Christian life is about going to church and listening to Bible studies. That is certainly an aspect of it, but

that is not the end, is it? That is a means to the greater end of glorifying God. But sometimes I think that this is the impression we give.

On the other hand, sometimes I think that preachers reduce the ministry to sermon preparation and delivery. That becomes what the ministry is all about. But the Scripture says that Jesus “went about doing good and healing all those who were oppressed by the devil” ([Acts 10:38](#)). If we are going to be bearing fruit, I think we are going to be doing similar kinds of things. We are going to be going about doing good.

I am not talking about being on a big “works” trip. Jesus just had that inclination toward helping people and He was drawn to people who had problems. Even His enemies knew that. You may remember in the synagogue they saw a man with a withered hand and they saw Jesus. They knew before it ever happened what was going to happen. They thought: “This guy Jesus, He cannot resist helping people. He is obsessed with helping people. He has this inclination toward that.” And if the Spirit of Christ is filling us, then there is going to be an inclination toward that. Again, it is not a “works” trip.

A while back I did a study on the subject of good works. I think it was [Ephesians 2:10](#) that I was teaching. I went through the New Testament and found all the references to “good works” and there are a lot of them. As far as fruit goes, the Lord is talking about just doing good things, just helping, being there to minister to people, visiting them in the hospital perhaps, or just taking some extra time to pray with them.

We finished up a service one evening and it was pretty late. Usually that is staying around till about 10:00. There were just a couple people left in the sanctuary. I was standing there talking with somebody, and there was somebody else in the back. I was just trying to wrap things up and since it was kind of late, I was anxious to get home. This young guy came and sat right in the front row. He was sitting there and he was kind of bouncing. He was kind of twitching a little bit. I thought, “Oh no, what is this guy about to do?” I was thinking, “Oh, it is so late, Lord.” I was with this person and looking for our assistant so he could do something with this guy. But the assistant was back there talking to somebody else. I was finishing up with this one person and I was feeling like, “I am just going to ignore this and get out of here and hopefully he will go away.”

And the Lord spoke to me so clearly and said, “Talk to that guy.” I said, “Lord, it is 10:15 now and it looks like he may have some serious problems and he will keep me here a lot longer.” But there was just that strong impression—“Talk to him.” I sat down beside him and said, “How are you doing?” And he turned to me. The guy had a mild form of cerebral palsy. He could speak fairly well and he just sat there pouring out his heart about the goodness of God, the love of God, about how lonely he was, and how he needed fellowship. Man, if I ever felt like an idiot, it was right then. I just sat there saying, “Lord, forgive me.” I spent about 45 minutes with him and had the greatest fellowship. I walked away saying, “Lord, thank You.” The blessing God had in store for me that night was meeting him. I run into him in the church now and again and he comes up and gives me a big hug.

Ministry involves those kinds of things. Sometimes it is just taking those extra few moments, just going out of our way. It is not saying, “Well, I put in my eight hours. It is my day off.” We are on the job 24/7. Jesus was on the job 24/7.

Bearing fruit is doing good works.

And then thirdly—and I do not want to underestimate this, but again, I have just been trying to look at it in order or priority—there of course is the issue of converts and disciples. That is certainly an aspect of fruit as well. This is what Jesus is talking about. This is what He is desiring. This is what God was looking for with Israel. They failed miserably. This is what God has been looking for throughout the church age. This is what God is looking for in our lives, that there would be fruit coming forth. That is, personal godliness, good works, and then impacting the lives of other people—seeing converts, seeing people come into a relationship with the Lord, or taking young Christians and building them up in the faith.

When we went to London we just had the most fabulous time. Before we went, God really spoke to me and showed me that our ministry was not initially to be an evangelistic ministry. It would be first of all a ministry to the suffering sheep, and secondly out of that, evangelism would spring forth. And that is exactly what the Lord did when we got to England. He began to bring to us, by the dozens, sheep that had been wounded, sheep that had just been starving and abused. People came from situations where they had been so disillusioned with church that they had not been in a church in ten years. Others were still in the church but they were just hanging on by a thread, just hoping and praying that something else would come along to minister to them. God began to bring them to us and then, out of that, evangelism began to take place as well.

I will never forget when we were leaving London. A number of the families in the church asked me one night, “Would you come over for dinner? We just want to have you over.” They were all of Afro-Caribbean background and they wanted to give me a nice Jamaican meal, which sounded good to me. As we were there, each one of them wanted to just take a few minutes to tell me how much I had impacted their lives. It was one of those heart-wrenching times when everybody was weeping and telling their stories. As I was listening I was thinking, “All these guys are really doing is testifying to the power of the Word of God.” They did not realize it because they were saying, “You did this and you did that.” After about 45 minutes of that I thanked them for their graciousness and all the wonderful things that they shared. I said, “But I want to draw your attention to something. I want you to notice there is a common thread in what you have been saying tonight. What I heard from every one of you was how the Word of God transformed your lives. I did not really do much. I just got up every week and faithfully taught you the Bible and God did the rest.”

That is the kind of fruit that we are talking about—that fruit of conversion, that fruit of discipleship. I believe that is the definition of fruit. I think that is what Jesus is talking about when He is talking about bearing fruit. But now the question is: How is fruit born? Jesus gives us the answer in the text. He says,

4 Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit. ([John 15:4-5](#))

We saw what fruit is, now how is it born? Jesus said, “Abide in Me,” but what does it mean? What does it mean to abide?

Jesus said, “The Father and I will come and we will make our abode with you.” I would like to think of abide in that sense of abode. What is your abode? Your abode is your home. Your abode is the place you live. That is the place your life is centered. That is where you dwell. That is the place where everything that is of any importance to you is more or less based, isn't it?

So when Jesus is saying that we are to abide in Him, what He is saying is, “Make your home in Me.” I love that picture of just making our home in Christ, planting our lives in the midst of His life, and clinging to Him.

To abide means to keep up a habit of constant close communion with Him. It means to be always leaning on Him, resting on Him, making Him our fountain of life and strength, our chief companion and our best friend.

In the ministry there is a big danger if we begin to love the ministry and get caught up in the ministry, but forget about the Lord—who we are ministering for? It is a reality, isn't it? We all struggle with it. We all know what it is like to get into the Bible to find a text to preach and to completely miss the application that it might have to our own lives. We all know what it is like to be reading through and saying, “Oh, that is so good. I cannot wait to preach that.” Instead we should be saying, “Lord, I am convicted.” God wants to speak to us through His Word.

This is what He is talking about—We are to be immersing ourselves in Him, abiding in Him. How is that accomplished?

He said, “If My words abide in you.” To have His Word abiding in us is to keep His sayings and precepts continually before our minds. It is that picture of being saturated with the Word of God.

Don't you love it when you see that in the life of a person? That is such an attractive thing to me. Someone said, “If you cut Spurgeon, he would bleed Bible ink.” He was just a walking Bible. Everything he said had some sort of a scriptural element to it. He was full of the Word of God. And as I meet people like that, I think, “Man that is what Jesus is talking about.” He is talking about abiding in Him and His Word abiding in us so that we are just living in this realm of the Word. When the Word has permeated our being, and we are planted and situated in Him, and He is rooted in us, then we are just really consumed with Him. That is the kind of thing that Jesus is describing here when He is talking about abiding.

Hudson Taylor was a great pioneer missionary to China. After a long struggle, Hudson Taylor discovered what he referred to later as his “spiritual secret.” It was that secret of abiding. As I was reading his biography I came to this one portion where it talks about a key moment in his life and ministry. He is really struggling. He is battling intensely because he is wondering if he can truly be a Christian with some of the things that were going on in his life. In his own words, he was struggling with the “sin of irritability.” What is the sin of irritability? I read that and I thought: “Is irritability a sin? I thought it was a caffeine overdose or maybe a low blood sugar problem or something like that.” He was seriously questioning whether or not he was a Christian because he was battling with irritability. The guy was living in China under miserable conditions, and he was sick with all kinds of illnesses. My goodness, I live in relative luxury and I get irritable a lot, but I do not usually think of it as a big sin. That is not really consistent with the character of Christ, is it? We do not read about Him being irritable.

Hudson Taylor was going through this whole battle with irritability. Then he realized that the solution was to abide in Christ. He started trying to really understand what that meant. How do I abide in Christ? He talks about how he committed to reading more of his Bible. He wanted to spend more time in prayer. He had all of these different things that he was going to do that were going to help him to abide and ultimately give him the victory over these things. Finally, after months and months of failure and frustration, he came to the realization that it was really nothing

more or less than just completely letting go and realizing that he was a branch in the vine. He needed to allow the life of the vine to flow through him. He writes in his journal:

The Lord Jesus received, is holiness begun. The Lord Jesus cherished, is holiness advancing. The Lord Jesus counted about as never absent, would be holiness complete. To let my loving Savior work in me His will, my sanctification is what I would live for by His grace. Abiding, not striving nor struggling, looking often to Him. Trusting Him for present power. Trusting Him to subdue all inward corruption. Resting in the love of an almighty Savior, in the conscious joy of a complete salvation from all sin, willing that His will should truly be supreme.

[How then do I bear fruit? Listen.] Only by thinking of all that Jesus is and all that He is for us. His life. His death. His work. He Himself is revealed to us in the Word, to be the subject of our constant thoughts. Not as striving to bear fruit or to increase fruit, but a looking off to the faithful One seems all we need. A resting in the loved One entirely for time and for eternity.

That was Hudson Taylor's spiritual secret. I would imagine that we have all had the experience of coming to the awareness of a sin in our lives, of an inconsistency of some sort, and then determining that we are going to conquer it. We focus on this particular thing and on all of the various steps that we are going to take to deal with this thing. And what happens? Six months pass and we are more miserable than when we started. We feel like greater failures than we ever did. We have also had the experience of seeing a situation in our lives and realizing that something it is not right. But instead of focusing on that, we focus on Christ. And then you find that without even really thinking about it, it is just no longer an issue.

Before I was a Christian, I had a very limited vocabulary. The few words that I knew were words that you would not generally use in mixed company. At one point in time, even though I was not a Christian, I came to the realization that my language was pathetic. I heard a couple of guys fighting with each other, cussing at each other and I thought, "Oh my goodness that is what I sound like." So I determined that I was not going to talk like that anymore. I did pretty well for about three months. And in about ten minutes, all of that hard work was completely blown away when I found myself in a situation where I just completely lost control. Every word that I had not said for three months, I said ten times over in just a short matter of time.

Some time later I came to Christ. And after I received Christ, I never really thought about my language. It just was not one of those things that was big on my mind. Six months later it dawned on me, "Wow, I do not talk like that anymore." I did not focus on the language problem and try to deal with it; I just focused on Jesus. I was so excited about being a Christian. I was so enthralled with the Scriptures and just immersing my life in the life of Christ. Time passed and I realized that swearing was not even an issue anymore.

When we are talking about the "how to" of bearing fruit, Jesus tells us that the secret is abiding.

As we look at the text, we see that it is not merely the bearing of fruit, but there are also indications that God wants to see fruit increase as time goes on. Do not be content with just a little bit of fruit. God wants more fruit and much fruit to be born from our lives. The second verse gives us insight into how fruit is increased. Look at [John 15:2](#).

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away.
Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes that it may bear more
fruit.

That is the third point that we want to talk about. How is fruit increased? It is increased by purging or by pruning. “Left to itself a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth. For maximum fruitfulness, extensive pruning is essential,” according to Leon Morris and his Gospel of John commentary. He says this is the suggested figure for the Christian life. Listen to this: “The fruit of Christian service is never the result of allowing natural energies and inclinations to run riot.”

How much ministry is the result of natural energies? You can produce something that looks like fruit. People in factories today can make stuff that looks like fruit, but when you bite into it your teeth fall out. It is not fruit. You can go into these model homes, see the fruit bowl there and grab that apple. But it is not really an apple; it is synthetic. It is fake. I dare to say that there are ministries where the natural energies have been applied and there is something that looks like fruit, but in reality it is not fruit.

Pruning is that process of cutting back. In order to bring forth more fruit pruning is absolutely necessary. Alexander McLaren did a great paragraph on this. He said,

Were you ever in a greenhouse or a vineyard at the season of cutting back the vines, it might seem a waste to see, scattered on the floor the bright green leaves and the incipient clusters, and to look at the bare stem bleeding at a hundred points from the sharp steel. But there was not a random stroke in it all. And there was nothing cut away which it was not loss to keep and gain to lose. And it was all done artistically, scientifically, for a set purpose; that the plant might bring forth more fruit.

The Lord wants to increase our fruit and sometimes there is that need for cutting back. This is my last point, but I want to touch on this in two areas. I want to touch on it in the area of our personal lives and in the area of our churches as well.

In our personal lives God cuts us back at times. He allows some sort of catastrophic thing to come upon us. He allows us to go through difficulties. These are all means of pruning. These are all means of bringing us to a place where we can actually produce more fruit, although we do not necessarily see it as that at the time.

In my own life personally, I remember many years ago the Lord speaking to me clearly. The Lord just began to say to me, “I want to expand your borders.” I did not read *The Prayer of Jabez*, but for lack of a better term that is the gist of what I thought God was saying to me. The Lord was saying that He wanted to just use me in different ways and capacities where I never thought He would use me. As the Lord began to show this to me, I wrote it in my journal and I still have that journal today. As I wrote this down I was obviously very excited at the prospect of what God wanted to do. But what I did not realize is that before that was going to happen, there was a major pruning that needed to take place.

God had given me all these words of encouragement, these promises, these visions to do these different things, but suddenly I found myself afflicted physically. Suddenly I found myself sicker

than I have ever been in my life. I was so sick I was convinced I was dying. Nobody could be as sick as I was and live through it. That is what I thought. I went into this period of illness that actually lasted seven years. There were times when it was so bad, I was miserable. It was so intense that I would just be crying out to the Lord. I wanted nothing more than to be healed. That was what I wanted. I will never forget one night just wrestling in my spirit, crying out to God, pleading with Him to heal me. Suddenly I had the thought in my mind, “What if I am using this to bring about more fruit in your life?” I was faced with this question from the Lord. It was almost like an option. It just seemed that I could be healed at that moment if I wanted to, or I could allow the pruning process to go on and reap the fruit that God had in mind. And as hard as it was, I just said, “Okay. Whatever You are doing, Lord, just keep doing it.” Now I look back and I still physically battle to some extent, but it is nothing like years ago. I look back and I see that was both the most miserable and in some sense, the most powerful time in my life. God did some things in me that needed to be done.

You remember Joseph had two sons in Egypt. He named one of them Ephraim. The name Ephraim means “fruitful in affliction.” It means “fruitful.” Joseph named him that because it was in his affliction that God brought him fruit.

God has ordained us to bring forth fruit and part of the bringing forth of fruit is that the pruning must take place. There will be those times when God is going to need to cut away. If they have not come yet, they will come. The interesting thing about pruning, which I discovered in reading, is that the older a plant gets the greater the need for pruning. As we grow, age, and mature, we start to see these things. Now I can see more clearly why the Lord does that cutting back. Do not be afraid of that. When it happens realize that God has a good plan here. He is only cutting back to bring forth more fruit.

When I was living in Oceanside we had two plants in our front yard that my wife always called potato plants. I do not know why because there were no potatoes on them. I guess that is the name of it. They were really pretty plants—bushes or shrubs with a long stem and this green bushy thing. It had these nice lavender flowers on it. One of them was always lush with a lot of flowers and the other one you could see more twigs. There was not much greenery on it and there were very few little lavender flowers. I would always look at it and wonder: “Why is this one flourishing and this one is not? They are only about six feet apart from each other. They are right in the same soil.”

But then I got to thinking about John 15. I thought, “Well, maybe pruning is what needs to occur here.” So I got out my little snips and cut that thing back. I cut it so far back that when I looked at it afterward I thought: “Oh no, I killed it. This thing has certainly got to be dead now.” It was pretty much just a stem that was left. My wife came out and said, “What did you do to this bush?” I said, “Honey, this is pruning, don’t you know? This is going to bear more fruit.” I did not know what I was talking about; I was just pretending like I did. Believe it or not, a few months later that thing started to grow back and it was just like the other one. It was green instead of brown. There were lots of these nice little lavender blossoms on it. I was shocked! That was an illustration right there of what Jesus was talking about.

Not only does it occur in our lives personally, it occurs in ministry as well. And remember this—and I think this is important in relation to ministry and church life—the older the plant is the greater the necessity of pruning. As our churches age and grow there are times when we actually need to cut back. It is always a painful process. Whenever you even start to move in that direction, people start screaming. “No, we do not want to do that.”

I think of my own experience at Costa Mesa. I just want to use this one little illustration. Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa is this great tree. Here is this fruitful vine that God has just blessed, multiplied, and increased. There is this beautiful plant, but it is older. It is aged. As I am coming back and beginning to get involved in the ministry, I am seeing that there are ministries that have been going on for years and years and years. They are no longer really bearing fruit but the same people are in the same place doing the same things. Maybe fifteen years ago there was vigor. There was life. There was an abundance of fruit, but now time has passed.

There is one particular ministry that I can think of right off hand. The guy had been involved for eighteen years and now there were just a couple of people involved. In that particular area, it was obvious to me that God wanted to do something fresh and new. The moment you get out the shears and start to prune, right away you hear: “Oh no! What are you doing? You cannot do this.” There is opposition and people think, “You are trying to destroy my life!”

As God is leading, you realize that is not what is happening. You see, what was happening is those people had stopped bearing fruit. They were no longer in that place of vital dependence on the Lord. They were no longer trusting God for new and exciting things. Now it was time for God to put them in a position once again where they had an opportunity to trust Him. They could not see it that way. They saw it as, “You are just kicking me out of here. You are mean and cruel and we do not like you.” But you go with what you sense God is leading you to do, and then you step back, watch, and see. Look what the Lord does. That ministry then begins to blossom again as new leadership comes in. It begins to flourish again. That person who was kicking, screaming, and telling you how horrible you were, when you see them a few months down the road they say, “Man, the Lord is so good. I needed to get out of there. Thanks for kicking me out.” You say, “I wish you would have told me that when I was kicking you out. You told me you hated my guts and wanted to...” And of course that happens so often because we have a tendency to not trust God.

As ministries grow we need to be sensitive to this reality. There are times when you have to cut things back. It is for the benefit of that particular fellowship that it might continue to bear fruit, but it is also for the benefit of that branch as well. I have found that a lot of times people get into a comfortable situation and they are very reluctant to step out of the comfort zone. If you leave it up to them, they will never step out of it even though they might be sitting there bearing no fruit whatsoever. They are branches but there has not been a berry on them in ages. What happens is that it needs to be snipped and you see then that branch becomes fruitful again once that happens.

I have one more illustration. I can think of another ministry where that was the case. I remember as I was talking to the pastor over this ministry that he was very unhappy where he was, but he was not unhappy enough to take a step, go out, and change the situation. I just felt that God was saying it was time to make the move. And now I can tell you he is a happy camper because there has been a new season of fruit in his life. It was a little bit tough because he was in a position for so long and comfortable. He had the steady paycheck and his life was settled. The Lord just did a little trimming back and moved him into a new area. And now the ministry where he had been struggling is prospering. He has gone on to a whole different area and he is flourishing right now too. And that is what the Lord does.

And so as we close, the Vinedresser knows. Jesus said, “I am the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser” ([John 15:1](#)). We need to trust God to work in His church and to work in our lives as we oversee His church. He wants us and our ministries to be producing fruit—first and foremost the fruit of personal godliness, and then those other things that follow. And we do that by abiding in Christ, living in Him, loving Him.

Here is the tricky thing. We are not to try to abide in Him just so we can bear fruit. We are to abide in Him because He is where you should abide. It is not, “Lord, I want to love You more so I can bear more fruit for You.” It is, “Lord, I just want to love You more because You are worthy of being loved more.” It is a very subtle line, isn’t it? So often I find that my motive for seeking after God is this thing I am trying to get. I just come back and think, “Wait a second, that is not it.” What if all of a sudden all ministry as we know it was just taken away from us? We still have Christ. And He is really what the ministry is all about. He is what life is all about. He is what everything is all about. And when it is all said and done, the really good thing is not what I got to do for Him, but the fact that He loves me, He saved me, and I just get to know Him. That is the great thing. He redeemed us to be sons first and servants second.

Father, we thank You that we have a relationship with You, first and foremost, Lord. And You know how all of us sometimes struggle with that balance, Lord. We are so excited about serving You. It is truly the greatest thing in the world. But Lord, sometimes we get so wrapped up in that, we neglect You. We forget that it is really mainly about You. Lord, we want to bear fruit. So help us, Lord, just to abide in You. Help us just to remember You, love You, and seek You not for what we can get out of it, but just because You are worthy to be sought.

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