

The Secret to a Fruitful Life!

John 15:1-8

Well spring has sprung! After a very slow start, tender leaves now fill the trees. The redbuds and the cherries are in blossom, various flowers adorn the Yard, and the world is beautiful again after a long and bitter winter.

It's against the backdrop of springtime that we read John 15:1-8 where Jesus describes the relationship that exists between him and his disciples using the analogy of a vine and its branches. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Christ says. (Jn. 15:5) There is hardly a passage in all the New Testament that better defines the nature of Christian discipleship. In this passage, Christ tells us what God wants from us, what God does for us, and what God expects of us.

First, Christ tells us what God wants from us. In a word, God wants fruit! Fruit is mentioned six times in our text and a total of eight times in this chapter. In the eighth verse Jesus says, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become (or prove to be) my disciples."

Yes, God wants us to bear fruit. But what kind of fruit are we called to bear? We're called to bear the fruit of Christian character, Christian conduct, and Christian converts! First, God wants us to bear the fruit of Christian character. Galatians 5:22-23 describes the fruit produced in us by the Spirit Christ gives us. It is the fruit of Christian character. Galatians 5:22-23 says, "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (ESV) These are the qualities of Christian or Christlike character.

Yes, we're called to bear the fruit of Christian character and we're called to bear the fruit of Christian conduct. Colossians 1:10-11 says we are supposed to "...lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him as (we) bear fruit in every good work." You see, Christian character produces Christian conduct. If we have the Spirit of Christ living in us then he'll produce Christlike conduct through us.

Finally, in addition to Christian character and Christian conduct, we should bear the fruit of Christian converts. People should convert to the Christian faith in part because of the character and conduct they see in us. You see, on several occasions in the New Testament, Christian converts are described as fruit. For example, in Romans 16:5, Epaphroditus is referred to as the first convert to Christ in Asia. The Greek actually says he's the first fruit in Asia. Yes, Christian converts are like fruit harvested for God. So you see, according to Jesus, God wants us to bear fruit. And the fruit he wants is the fruit of Christian character, Christian conduct, and Christian converts.

Jesus not only tells us what God wants from us, he also describes what God does for us. What does God do for us? He does four things to help us produce a harvest for him. He grafts us. He feeds us. He lifts us. He prunes us.

First, God grafts us; he grafts us into the vine. You see, no one is connected to Christ by birth or by nature. We are wild shoots destined for the burning; so we must be grafted into the vine of Christ through faith in Christ if we are to have any hope of being spared. Paul makes this point using a similar analogy – the analogy of an olive tree – in Romans chapter eleven. In Romans eleven, Paul describes how most of God’s chosen people, were rejected by God and broken off like worthless branches from an old olive tree because they rejected Jesus. On the other hand, Gentiles, who were never counted among God’s people, were grafted into the tree because of their faith. This is how Paul puts it: “(If) some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches...They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith.” (Rm. 11:17-18, 20)

You see, none of us are connected to Christ by birth or by nature. We are all wild shoots destined for the burning; so we must be grafted into the vine of Christ through faith in Christ if we are to have any hope of being spared. So God grafts us – he grafts us into the vine and makes us his own. This grafting comes through faith in Christ and is typically enacted in the sacrament of baptism when we are baptized into Christ. (See Gal. 3:27 which speaks of being baptized “into Christ.”)

Next, God feeds us. Through Christ, God pumps spiritual life and vitality into us. In John 15:5 Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” You see, the vine draws nourishment from the root and pumps that nourishment into the branches so they can bear fruit. This means that the spiritual life is not our work; and the fruit we bear is not ours either. It’s God’s work in us. Through Christ, God pumps spiritual life into us in order to bear fruit through us. He feeds us with all we need so long as we abide in him.

Next, God lifts us – he lifts us when we’re drooping so we can bear fruit for his glory. In John 15:1-2 Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.” Many commentators believe this removal refers to the removal and burning of fruitless members from Christ’s holy Church. And that may be the case. But some commentators see a different meaning. You see, instead of translating the verse to say “he removes every branch in me,” a literal translation of might read as follows: “My Father lifts up every branch in me that bears no fruit.” Why does he lift them up? He lifts them up to help them grow some fruit for his greater glory.

Now I don’t have a lot of experience with grape vines but my father and I raised a lot of tomatoes when I was young. And I remember tying tomato branches up off the ground. We did that to keep their blossoms from rotting in the mud which would certainly make them fruitless, or else to keep their fruit from spoiling on the soggy ground. Now it

strikes me that this is just the way the Father is. He isn't quick to condemn the fruitless branch. Rather, he's patient with us and does everything he can to help us bear some fruit for him. (See Lk. 13:6-9 for a similar teaching.)

So what does God do for us? He grafts us – he grafts us into the vine of Christ. Then he feeds us – he pumps spiritual life into us. Then he lifts us – he lifts us when we're drooping so we can bear some fruit for him. Then he prunes us so we can bear even more fruit for his glory. In John 15:2 Jesus says, "Every branch that bears fruit he (the vinegrower) prunes to make it bear more fruit." Again, I don't have a lot of experience with grape vines but I remember raising tomatoes with my father. And he would go through the plants, row by row, plucking small branches from them. He called them "suckers." They were little branches, often growing at the base of other branches. If left alone, they would produce beautiful branches but little fruit. You see, they sucked the sap but didn't produce the fruit. By pruning the "suckers," my father helped the plants to produce more tomatoes than they would otherwise have done if left alone.

Now there are a lot of "suckers" in the average Christian's life – things that may be beautiful in and of themselves but things that ultimately drain the spiritual vitality of the Christian disciple. Work and leisure are lead among them. Our jobs and our hobbies often crowd Christ to the margins of life. They consume so much of our energy that we often have little left for church, prayer, bible study, loving service, and Christian witness. And then we wonder why we don't bear fruit. We wonder why our character and our conduct aren't what they ought to be and why no one is drawn to Christ through our life and witness. Well we have to be pruned. We have to cut away some temporal things so eternal things can increase. With God's help, we have to trim our lives of the superfluous so we can spend more time on the things that really matter – eternal things that bear lasting fruit for God and for his kingdom.

Well, so far we've seen what God wants from us and what God does for us. Now let's look at what God expects of us. What does God expect of us? He expects us to abide in Christ. Remember what Jesus said in John 15:4-5. He said, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Abiding is the secret to bearing. Abiding in Christ is the secret to bearing fruit for Christ. As we abide in Christ, we receive God's help. We're fed, lifted, and pruned so we can produce the fruit of Christian character, Christian conduct, and Christian converts. So what does it mean to abide in Christ? It means we must be connected to Christ as a branch is connected to a vine and we must continue to cultivate that close connection each and every day. But how do we cultivate this close connection? We cultivate the connection through the word of God, through personal prayer, and through Christian fellowship.

First, we cultivate our connection with Christ through the word of God. Notice John 15:7. Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." You see, there's a clear connection between abiding in Christ and abiding in his word. My friend, as you fill your mind with the word of Christ then you'll begin to have the mind of Christ and with the mind of Christ you'll think like Christ and act like Christ. In other words, you'll develop Christian character and Christian conduct. My friend, are you spending time every day in the word of God? If not then the world's words will fill your mind and you will live a worldly life as a consequence.

If you want to abide in Christ, you have to abide in his word. And then you have to abide in prayer. Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Again, there's a clear connection between praying to Christ, abiding in Christ, and bearing fruit for Christ. And I'm not talking about the usual kind of prayer that focus on physical needs only as important as that is. Instead, I'm talking about prayer that focuses on bearing fruit for the glory of God? Are you asking God to give you the fruit of Christian character, Christian conduct, and Christian converts? If not, then don't be surprised if you're a barren branch.

Finally, if you want to abide in Christ then you have to abide in Christian fellowship. Throughout this passage, Jesus uses the second person plural pronoun to address his disciples as a group. You see, he is speaking to them as a collective fellowship; and the passage that immediately follows our text is all about the disciples loving one another. In John 15:12 Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." And then in John 15:16 he concludes the section on love by saying this: "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

You see, we best bear fruit when we are part of a loving community of fellow Christians who are studying together, praying together, loving one another, and encouraging each other to bear fruit that will last. My friend, are you part of such a group as that? If not, then you need to start one. Ask a fellow believer to meet regularly with you for prayer, bible study, accountability, and encouragement. It's the secret to bearing fruit.

My friend, are you part of the vine? Have you been grafted into Christ by baptism and made his own by faith? And are you bearing the fruit of Christian character, Christian conduct, and Christian converts? Or are you a barren branch? God wants to feed you, lift you, and prune you so you can bear fruit for his glory. And you can if you will abide in Christ through his word, through fellowship, and prayer. Will you renew your commitment to abide? Remember, abiding is the secret to bearing. You must abide in Christ to bear fruit for Christ. May each of us bear fruit, more fruit, and much fruit for God's glory! Amen.