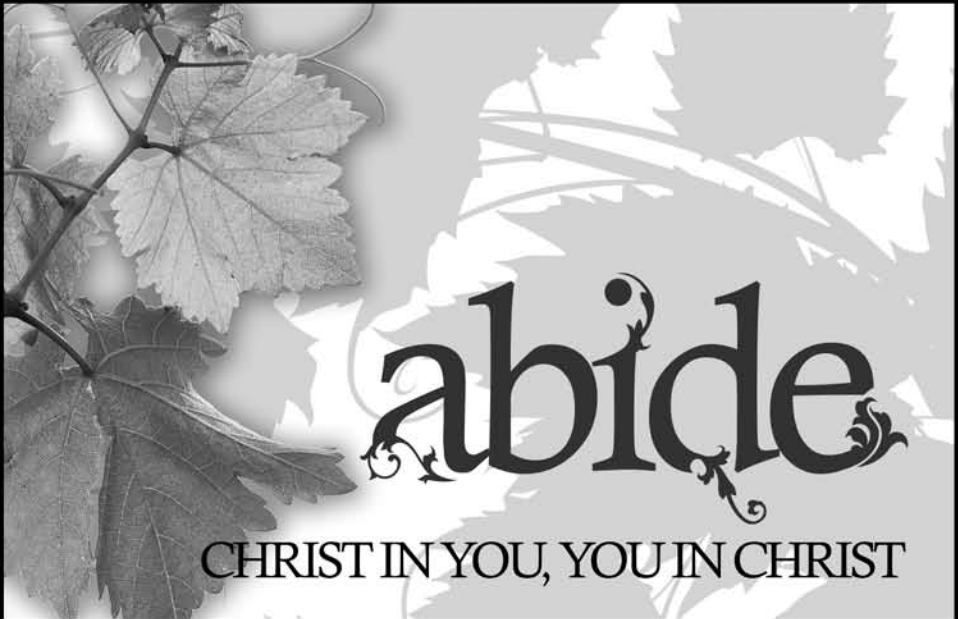


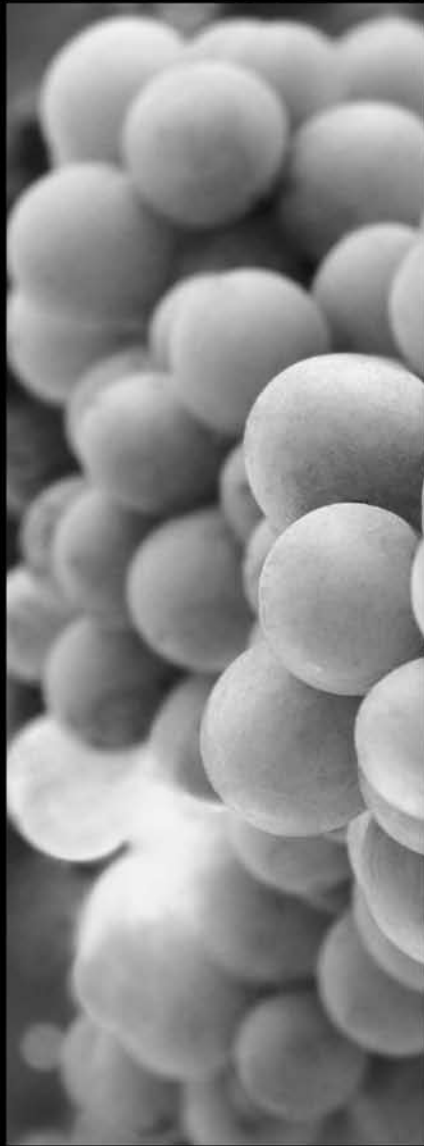


SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY



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CHRIST IN YOU, YOU IN CHRIST



LESSON 5

Times of Adversity

Key Text: John 15:1-5

Introduction

As we have spent the last four weeks studying John 15:1-17, our focus has been on developing an intimate relationship with Christ by abiding in Him. We have seen through His Word that abiding (remaining) in Him is not about “doing” things for Him, but about being with Him. We abide in Christ when we choose daily to surrender our lives to His purposes and ways, focusing our lives on Him instead of on ourselves.

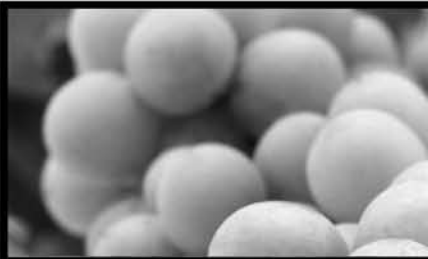
Abiding is developing a deeper connection and intimacy with Christ by spending time with Him, getting to know Him better. Last week we saw that one of the best ways to spend time with Christ is through His Word.

Not Only for Our Own Good

The purpose for having an intimate relationship with Christ is not only for our own good, but also for the good of those around us. It is God’s will that all of His “branches” in Christ be fruitful. As we receive abundant life in Christ, it is God’s will that we bring forth an abundant harvest for the world to see. Abundance isn’t only something we receive into our lives from Christ as we abide in Him, but it is also something that our lives pour forth into other people.

This is the beauty of abiding in Christ. We receive so that we can give. As we bear fruit, God is glorified through our lives and we experience unspeakable joy and satisfaction because we are fulfilling the purpose for which we have been saved.

Before we begin this week’s study, take a few minutes to review the key points of last week’s lesson with your group. Use the following questions as you review:



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- 1) What are some of the reasons that we should abide in Christ through His Word?
- 2) How is the Bible useful in our lives?
- 3) How is the Bible alive and active in our lives?
- 4) What does the Bible have to do with purity in our lives?
- 5) How is it a weapon for us?

Becoming Fruitful

This week, we are going to focus our study on how the Father makes His branches fruitful. John 15:1-5 has a lot to say not only about abiding, but also about the branches bearing fruit. We have established in earlier lessons why fruitfulness is so important to Christ—because it brings His Father glory on earth. We have learned what the “lasting fruit” is that Christ mentions in John 15:16. It is a Christlike character and pouring our lives into other people by making disciples.

Since we have seen that it is God’s will for us to be fruitful, and that the *only* way to bear fruit is by abiding in the Vine, it is time for us to examine John 15 to understand how God (the gardener) makes us fruitful. We know we cannot make ourselves fruitful, so how does God deal with His branches? That is what we will discover this week.

Opening Prayer

Begin your time in study of God’s Word by praying for your group. Pray that God will open the heart of every person and reveal Himself to you all in a new way as you study and discuss His Word together. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you into the truth and show you all how to apply what you learn to your lives in a practical way. And pray that God will be glorified through your discussion today.

Key Study

This week we are going to focus our study on one important, and sometimes troubling, verse in the Parable of the Vine. John 15:2 says, “He (God) cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” As we study this verse today, it is important to put it in context with the rest of the passage so that we do not misinterpret it’s meaning.

Remember, Jesus is teaching this parable to help His disciples understand how to have the fruitful life that God intends for every believer. The focus of the parable is abiding in Christ for the purpose of bearing fruit that will last. Whatever God does or allows in our lives is for the purpose of making us fruitful.

...Not What You Might Be Thinking...

Many would look at verse two and derive that if someone isn’t bearing fruit, he must not be a Christian because of the phrase “cuts off.” But that is not what this passage is teaching at all. First, notice that the verse says the gardener cuts off every branch “in Me” that does not bear fruit. Remember our first lesson on every believer’s new position “in Christ”? Non-Christians are not “in Christ.” They are “in Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:22). So Jesus cannot be talking about non-believers in this verse. The Parable of the Vine in John 15 refers to branches (disciples) that have been placed “in Me,” according to verse two.

Others might say that verse two is teaching that believers who do not bear fruit lose their salvation—that God literally “cuts” them out of the Vine. This view does not stand up theologically, as it contradicts other Scripture. Salvation

is God's work in our lives through His Son. We do not "do" anything to earn salvation, therefore it makes no sense that we could "do or not do" anything to lose it. Ephesians 2:8-10 clearly communicates this truth:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Grace for a Purpose

This passage teaches that we have done nothing to earn or gain salvation. Even the faith we exercise to accept His grace and forgiveness is a gift from God, so that no one can boast. We also see in this passage that we have been recipients of God's grace for a purpose—in order to do the good works He has planned for us in advance. Or, as we have seen in John 15, in order to bear fruit that glorifies God.

Have your group open their Bible and turn to John 15:1-5. Have someone read the passage aloud. Using the commentary above and the following questions, lead your group in a discussion in order to put John 15:2 in context.

- 1) Who is the gardener for the vine and branches according to verse 1?
- 2) In nature, what is the purpose of a gardener? Does he only tend healthy plants, or both healthy and unhealthy plants?
- 3) According to verse 2, what are the two types of branches that the gardener tends in this parable?
- 4) What is the position of both of these types of branches according to verse 2? In other words, who are they "in"?
- 5) What does He do for the branches that bear "no fruit"?
- 6) What does He do for the branches that do bear fruit?

Using the commentary, explain to your group that verse two is telling us how the Father tends to believers who aren't bearing fruit, and to those who are bearing fruit. This verse does not refer to losing one's salvation since both types of branches are "in Christ."

Have the group turn to Ephesians 2:8-10. Have someone read this verse aloud and discuss it using the following questions.

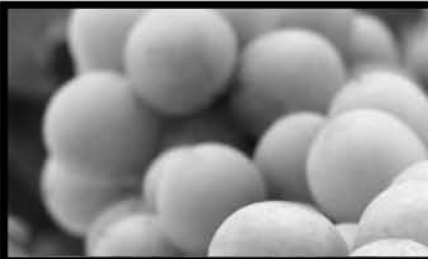
- 7) According to verse 8, how is someone saved—"by" what and "through" what?
- 8) How does verse 8 describe this faith?
- 9) According to verse 9, what doesn't save someone? Why not?
- 10) Based on verse 10, what is the purpose of salvation?
- 11) Based on this passage in Ephesians, how do we know that the branches that aren't bearing fruit in John 15:2 cannot be "cut off" from their position "in the Vine"?

Different Branches

There are two groups of branches "in Christ" that God (the gardener) is dealing with in this passage. One group bears no fruit, and the other bears fruit. Just as any good gardener does, God lovingly and carefully nurtures both His healthy and His unhealthy plants. We will look at both types of branches and how the Father nurtures each differently in order to bring forth fruit.

First, let's look at what God does to believers who are not bearing fruit. Many people would say that if someone isn't bearing fruit, he must not truly be saved. But John 15:2 tells another story. Here we see a branch "in Christ" that is not bearing fruit. What is important to understand is that *God doesn't allow the barren branch to remain fruitless*. Verse two shows God actively intervening





in order to bring forth fruit from the branch. It is possible for a believer to not bear fruit for a time. But it is not Biblical that someone would be a Christian and never bear fruit. Why? *Because the Gardener will not allow it.* He will intervene to make us fruitful in seasons of barrenness in our lives. What causes a believer not to bear fruit? Things such as unknown or unconfessed sin, wrong attitudes, selfishness, pride, self-reliance, independence from the Vine and even apathy. Many different kinds of sin can cause a fruitless branch.

A Fruitless Season?

How does the Father deal with such a branch in a fruitless season? Verse two says, “He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit.” It is in verses like this that a concordance is necessary to really understand what this verse means. The original Greek word that is translated “cut off” is the word *airo*; and it means “To raise up; elevate; lift up, or to raise up from the ground.” Unfortunately, the phrase “cut off” is a poor translation of this word. Based on the definition of *airo*, God lifts fruitless branches up off of the ground. He elevates them. He lifts them up.

This won’t mean much to us if we aren’t familiar with grape farming. So lets dig a little deeper into how grapes are grown to understand what Jesus is teaching in John 15:2. Grape gardeners spend countless hours walking through the vineyards tending to the grapes. New branches that have been grafted into the vine have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground. But a branch growing along the ground will never bear fruit because it does not get the light it needs, the leaves get coated in dust, and when it rains they get mildewed. Remaining on the ground or in darkness will cause a branch to become sick and barren.

Lifting Up the Branches

So what does the gardener do? He walks throughout the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches growing on the ground. When he finds them, he lifts them up off of the ground and washes them off with the water, and then wraps them around a trellis or ties them up to keep them from trailing back down to the ground and to help them get the light they need. Soon, these branches that were once sick and useless are bearing fruit. When a gardener finds fruitless branches he doesn’t “cut them off” and throw them away—they are too valuable for that. He lifts them up, cleans them off, and helps them to become fruitful again.

This is the picture of God’s work in the life of a believer who is not bearing fruit that Jesus is painting in John 15:2. It is the picture of a loving Father carefully tending to barren branches, helping them to thrive again. So how does God “lift up and wash off” fruitless believers? Scripture teaches us that He does this through discipline.

Discipline Is Not Punishment

Most of us in North America do not have a Biblical view of God’s discipline. We mistake God’s discipline for His judgment or His punishment. In order to understand God’s work in our lives, we must have a Biblical view of His discipline. Let’s look at a passage in Hebrews that shows us how God views discipline.

Hebrews 12:5-11

“You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son

is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

In this passage, we see that God's discipline is how He proves to us that we are His legitimate children. Have you ever thought of discipline that way? It is the proof that God cares enough about us to intervene for our ultimate good, even though it isn't pleasant at the time. Notice that verse five calls this passage a "word of encouragement." It should encourage us that God loves us enough to discipline us when we aren't bearing fruit. If He didn't, we would continue to "grow along the ground" and live in darkness, never experiencing the joy and satisfaction of thriving in the Vine. So what is God's discipline?

Godly Discipline

First, let's look at the Greek definition of the word "discipline" to help us understand the Gardener's work in our lives. Because so many people don't receive godly discipline from their parents, the comparison in this passage between God's discipline and our earthly father's discipline can be upsetting and confusing. God is the perfect Father, and any shortcomings or mistakes of an earthly father should not be attributed to our Heavenly Father.

The Greek meaning of "discipline" in this passage is, "The whole training and education of children, which relates to the cultivation of mind and morals, and employs for this purpose commands, admonitions, reproof and punishment."

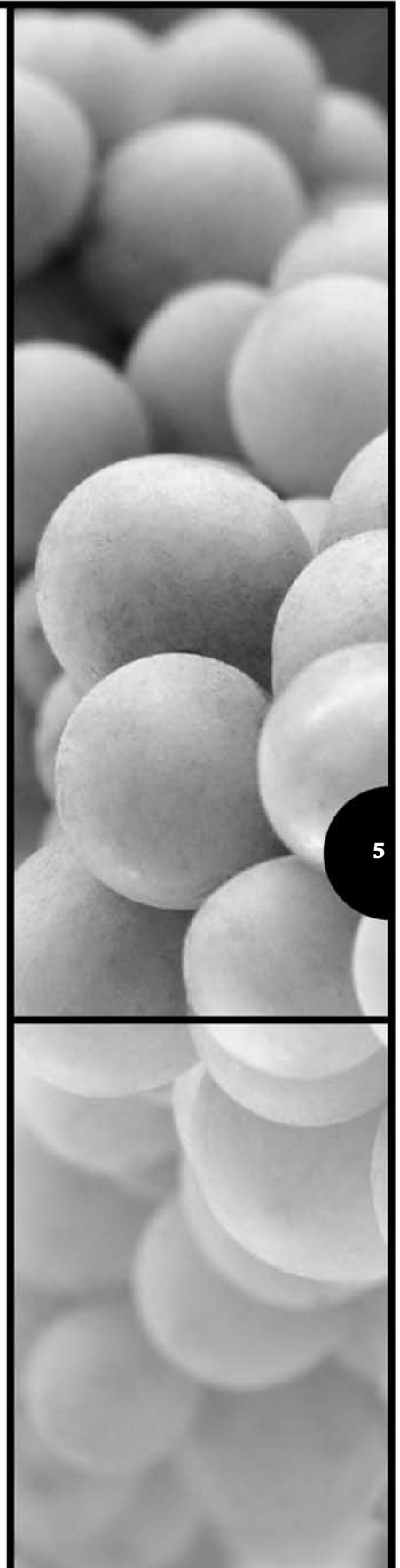
Notice in this definition that discipline isn't punishment by God. Discipline *employs* punishment in order to train and educate. When God disciplines a barren branch, He isn't punishing it. He is "lifting it up" to the position it needs to be in to become fruitful again. Verse five of this passage encourages believers not to "lose heart" when we are disciplined by God. Why? Verse six says because He "disciplines those He loves."

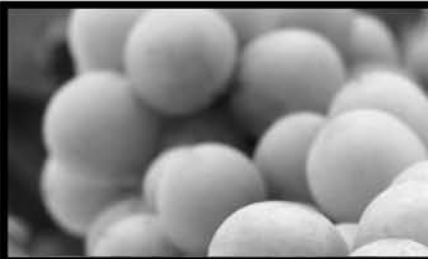
Enduring Education

Verse seven says to "endure hardship as discipline." The word "hardship" here is the same Greek word as "discipline." So God is telling us to endure His education and training, even though it may "employ" uncomfortable measures such as commands, admonitions, reproof, and punishment (which literally means scourging). But guess what the word "endure" means in verse seven? It is the Greek verb *hypomeno*, and it means, "Remain; abide; bear bravely and calmly." Hebrews 12 is telling us to abide through discipline! Isn't this just what Jesus is teaching us in John 15? He says in John 15:4 that no branch can bear fruit if it doesn't abide in the vine. And in John 15:2 Jesus says that His Father "cuts off," or disciplines every branch that bears no fruit in order to make it fruitful.

Discipline Enables Us to Flourish

Do you see how God's discipline goes hand-in-hand with John 15:2? We must not view God's discipline in our lives as a negative thing. His discipline is lovingly administered in order to lift us up and wash us off, cleansing us from the sin in our lives that leaves us barren, thus enabling us to flourish in our position in the Vine. Just like those grape branches in nature, it will always be our natural tendency to fall back into patterns of sin, living in darkness





even after we place our faith in Christ. But John 15:2 is good news for every believer! God will never allow us to remain in a sinful, fruitless season for too long. Eventually, He will intervene. Notice what Hebrews 12:11 says. This discipline will not be “pleasant” at the time. In fact, it may even seem “painful.” However, verse 11 promises that it will eventually produce “a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Discipline Brings a Harvest

Remember God’s goal in discipline, or in “cutting off” (lifting up) the fruitless branches is not to be mean or punish anyone, but to produce fruit where there is none. Discipline brings a harvest for God’s glory through the lives of those who abide through it and allow themselves to be trained by Him. What good news! God will never allow a branch to remain fruitless forever. He will lift it up, wash it off, and cause it to flourish again.

Explain to your group that we are going to begin our study of John 15:2 by looking at the branches that “bear no fruit.” Have a volunteer read John 15:2 aloud once again. Then, using the commentary and the following questions, lead your group through a discussion of what it means for God to “cut off” fruitless branches. Make sure to keep the focus on how God brings about fruitfulness.

Before you begin the discussion, share the Greek definition of “cuts off” in John 15:2 with the group. Also share the information from the commentary about how grape farmers deal with fruitless branches.

- 1) Based on the Greek definition of “cuts off” (lift up) and the information about grape farming, how does God deal with believers who are not bearing fruit (John 15:2)?
- 2) So is it possible for a believer that bears no fruit to stay that way forever? Why or why not?
- 3) What does that mean for you as a Christ follower? Are you comforted by this truth that God will not allow you to remain in a season of not bearing fruit?

Explain that we are going to see in Scripture that God’s discipline is His way of “lifting up and washing off” a fruitless believer.

Have the group turn to Hebrews 12:5-11 and have someone read the passage aloud to the group. Then, using the commentary, share the Greek definitions of “discipline” and “endure” with the group. Using the commentary and the following questions, lead them through a discussion of God’s discipline.

- 4) How does verse 5 tell believers to receive God’s discipline?
- 5) Why should we have this attitude towards His discipline according to verse 6?
- 6) What does verse 7 say about hardship?
- 7) Based on the Greek definition of “endure,” what are we to do throughout God’s discipline in our lives?
- 8) According to verse 8, what would be true about you if God did not discipline you?
- 9) What is the comparison made in verses 9-10?
- 10) Based on verse 10, what is God’s ultimate goal in disciplining any believer?
- 11) What is the reality of discipline during the time we are receiving it based on verse 11?
- 12) What does discipline produce in those who are trained by it according to verse 11?
- 13) How does verse 11 relate to John 15:2 in dealing with a branch that isn’t bearing fruit?

- 14) What are some ways that we, like new grape branches, might “grow along the ground,” allowing ourselves to become dirty and sick branches that don’t bear fruit?
- 15) Why is God’s discipline necessary in such situations?
- 16) What does this passage in Hebrews teach you about God’s love for you?
- 17) Should you be more concerned if you are being disciplined, or aren’t being disciplined by God? Why?

The Other Branches

Next, we are going to look at the other group of branches Jesus mentions in John 15:2. He says, “...while every branch that does bear fruit He (God) prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” We have seen how God disciplines believers who aren’t bearing fruit in order to make them fruitful again. Now, we will see how God “prunes” fruitful branches in order to bring forth even more fruit through them.

Once again, it will be useful for us to examine how a grape farmer deals with fruit-bearing branches. Does he leave them alone since they are already yielding fruit? No, he prunes them to make room for more fruit. Because grape vines grow so quickly the branches become so dense that light cannot reach the area where fruit grows. If left alone by the gardener, the branches will always favor new growth over fruit. Therefore, pruning is the most important function of a gardener to keep a branch healthy and bearing fruit.

Similarities

Don’t you see some similarities in believers who are bearing fruit? “Rampant growth” can also occur in our lives, choking out the light of Christ in us. This unhealthy growth could be characterized as those things in our lives that aren’t necessarily bad, but keep us from bearing more fruit. They are the things that take up our attention and time, keeping us busy and preoccupied so that we aren’t reaching our full “fruit-bearing” potential. So what does the Gardener do with such a branch? He prunes it so that more fruit can be produced through the branch.

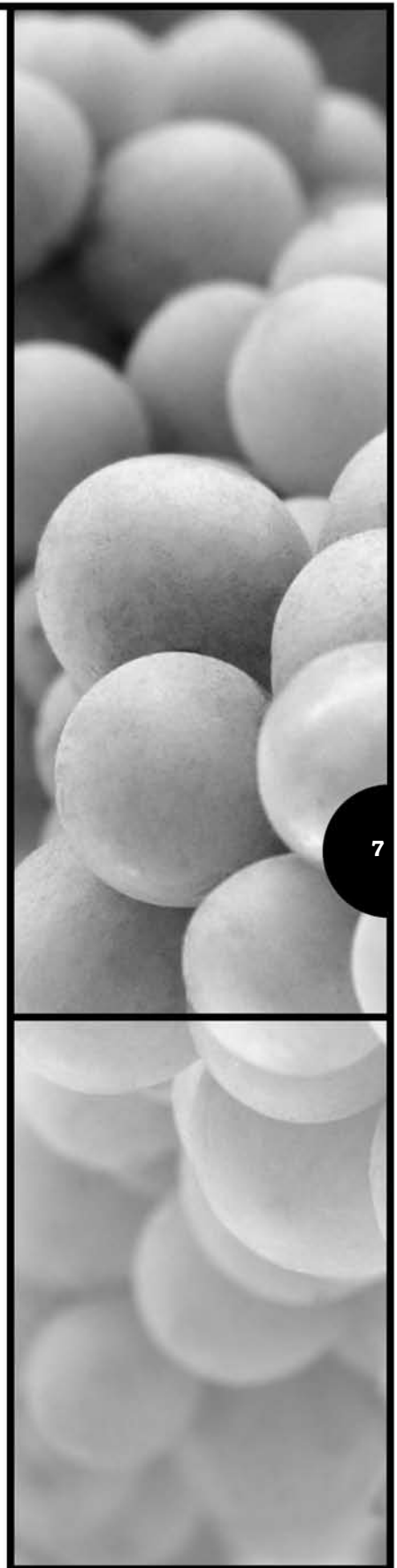
The Greek word for “prune” in John 15:2 is *kathairo*; and it means, “To purge; to cleanse of impurity; to prune trees and vines from useless shoots.” What Jesus is saying in this verse is that when the Father sees that a believer is bearing fruit, He will purge (remove) useless things from his life so that he can become even more fruitful. If left alone, the branch would “overgrow” and choke out the light necessary to continue to bear fruit.

So how does God “prune” a believer? How does He remove unnecessary things from our lives that we might be holding onto? He does so by speaking truth to us from His Word and by the testing our faith.

Pruning

The Greek word translated “prune” or “purge” in John 15:2 is the same Greek word that is translated “clean” or “cleansed” in the very next verse. There we read, “*You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to you.*” Here we see the two-fold work of the Holy Spirit using the Word of God that we’ve already studied.

First, God uses His Word to open our eyes to the need for a Savior. God exposes our sinfulness to us through His Word and then uses His Word to help us understand that Jesus is the only solution, the only Savior, for our sinful condition. He draws us to Jesus by using God’s Word so that we will be saved as we confess Christ as our Lord. Then, we are eternally cleansed (justified) of





our sin before God has He places us “in Christ.” Once in Christ the Holy Spirit uses God’s Word to expose our wrong motives, selfishness, pride, fascinations and distractions, etc. so that we can let go of those things and experience the spiritual transformation needed to abide more in Him. The result is that we will bear even more fruit for God’s glory.

In addition to His Word, God uses adversity within the life of a believer to help us experience transformation in order to bear fruit. The Bible calls these adversities “testing of our faith” and “trials”. Let’s look at this truth in Scripture:

James 1:2-4

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

James 1:12

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.”

Romans 5:3-5

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.”

Tested

In all of these passages we see that the testing of our faith through trials and even suffering is how God develops our character. Have you ever thought about a trial or suffering as a good sign? It is evidence that you are a fruit-bearing branch! God is pruning your life, removing needless things in order to bring forth more fruit. This is why James 1:2 says to consider it “pure joy” when we face trials. It is evidence that we are abiding in Christ and bearing fruit. We can know that when God tests our faith, it is for the purpose of bringing forth the fruit of perseverance, character, and hope in our lives. And we are promised in James 1:12 that there is a crown of life for all who abide through God’s pruning process in their lives.

Explain to your group that now we are going to look at God’s work in the lives of believers who are bearing fruit. Review John 15:2 and what it says about God pruning fruitful branches to make them more fruitful.

Using the commentary above, share the purpose and process of pruning in grape farming. Share the Greek definition of “prunes” in John 15:2 as well. Point out that it is the same word that is translated “clean” in verse 3. Explain that the way God “prunes” fruitful branches is by using His Word and the testing of their faith through trials and suffering. Explain the two-fold work of the Spirit—to expose our sinfulness and to transform our lives.

Have the group turn to James 1:2-4 and read it aloud. Then have someone skip down and read James 1:12. Using the commentary and the following questions, lead the group in a discussion of these verses.

- 1) According to verse 2, what should be a believer’s attitude towards trials in his life?
- 2) Why should this be his attitude, according to verse 3?
- 3) Why is perseverance so important in a Christian’s life according to verse 4?
- 4) How do trials test our faith?

- 5) How does God use trials to “prune,” or rid our lives of useless things that hinder “new fruit” in our lives?
- 6) How can seemingly “good growth” in our lives actually end up keeping us from bearing more fruit, just like a grape branch?
- 7) According to James 1:12, what is the reward for fruitful Christians who abide and persevere through God’s pruning in their lives?

Have the group turn in their Bible to Romans 5:3-5 and read it aloud. Using the commentary and the following questions, continue your discussion of God’s pruning in our lives.

- 8) According to verse 3, what should be our attitude amidst suffering? Why?
- 9) What does perseverance lead to based on verse 4?
- 10) What does character bring?
- 11) What does verse 5 promise about hope?
- 12) How does suffering produce perseverance, character, and hope in our lives?

Conclusion

In light of what we have learned about discipline, God’s Word and trials, John 15:2 is a reminder of how much the Father cares for every branch that He has graciously placed “in” the Vine. Every branch in Him will benefit from the Gardener’s careful care. The challenge is for us to receive His nurturing with a joyful heart, learning to be thankful for His loving intervention in our lives. It may be painful at the time, but it ensures a harvest for His glory if we abide through it.

As you close your time together, break into smaller groups for deeper discussion. Have the groups discuss the following questions and pray together before you dismiss.

- 1) Based on today’s lesson, what do you think is the difference in God’s discipline and His testing in our lives?
- 2) How might we know whether we are being disciplined, or tested?
- 3) How can unconfessed sin in our lives lead to God’s discipline? If this is the case, how should we respond to Him?
- 4) Based on all you have seen in God’s Word today, how are we as believers able to rejoice in discipline, trials, suffering and the conviction of the Holy Spirit through God’s Word?
- 5) What does rejoicing and abiding through such times show the world around us about our God?
- 6) Are you in the midst of a test of faith right now that you would like to share? How can your brothers and sisters pray for and encourage you during this “pruning” season?

Application

Ask God to reveal to you this week anything in your life that you need to let go of in order to bear more fruit for His glory.

