

ROOTED – PRUNING FOR PRODUCTIVITY

The story is told that years ago of a man from a remote mountain village who had the opportunity to visit a large modern city for the first time. He was amazed at all the electric lights which he saw everywhere. So, he bought a pack of electric lights bulbs and an electrical switch so he could turn them off and on. Arriving home, he hung the light bulbs around his hut and then called all his neighbors to come over at dark to see what he had brought back from the city. Everyone watched him with curiosity as he walked over the electrical switch that had been mounted on his wall. He turned it on, but nothing happened. No one had told him about electricity. He did not know the light bulbs were useless unless connected to the source of their power.

Today we are continuing in our series entitled Rooted. Just like the growth in the plants and flowers all around us this season, we are looking at the fact that God desires us to grow in our faith.

John 15:1-5 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He 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. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." There are many people who do not know that the way they are living their lives is useless. They have a good education; they have a good job; they own a big house and have a family. Like the story I began with this morning, they think that these things are enough. They reach for the light switch and turn it on but nothing happens. Why?

This scripture we read this morning reminds us of 3 important truths about growth;

1. God's Desire – even more fruitfulness

God's desire for our lives is that we experience fruitfulness. Not just life but life abundant. In Christ we are expected to bear spiritual fruit. If you had a child and it never grew, it never put on weight or learned to walk and talk, you would be concerned. So it is with us. Healthy living things grow. Growth is not an option.

John 15:16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last.

This is God's desire for us. It is what He expects of us. So, why is it that so often Christians do not experience true growth and transformation? Why is it that we are so often unfruitful, and what is God's perspective on our unfruitfulness?

Luke 13:6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 8 "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

The characters in this parable are clear. The owner is God, the caretaker is Christ and the fig tree, from the context of the passage, is the nation of Israel. It was the people Jesus was talking to. The owner (God) expected to see figs on His tree, and had been looking for them to come for quite some time. The caretaker (Jesus) intercedes for the tree and was working hard to try to get it to produce fruit. God had chosen Israel to be a light to the rest of the world. He expected Israel to reflect His love and character to all peoples. They had failed in that task.

Isaiah 49:6 It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

Here we see that time was running out for Israel. God was about to uproot it as His chosen people, his vehicle to pronounce His truth and love to the nations. Today we as the church have been given this responsibility. We are called to show God's love. We are called to bear fruit.

Grape vines are planted to bear grapes. A fig tree planted in a vineyard is expected to grow figs. Notice that this fig tree was planted in a vineyard. Vineyards are special places designed and prepared specifically for growing plants. They have rich soil, fertilizer, sunlight and caretakers to remove weeds and make sure that there is plenty of water. Plants grown in these ideal surroundings are expected to produce fruit.

If you have ever driven on the 400 up to Barrie, you would have passed through the Holland Marsh. It is a lush valley North of Toronto of more than 7000 acres known for rich black soil, perfect for growing vegetables. A hundred years ago this area was once just a swamp, but in the 1920s it was drained and settled by Dutch farmers. It is some of the most expensive farmland in Ontario. Imagine owning a prime piece of farmland in the Holland March. The soil is perfect, the conditions are just right, you plant your seeds and nothing happens. Do you think the farmer would be happy?

Like the fig tree, God expects us as Christians to grow and to produce fruit. God does not expect us to come to Him already perfected. We come to Him as we are and give Him permission to do what He wants in our lives. Like children, we expect to see growth and development. That is God's desire for us. If growth does not happen, there is a problem!

2. God's Decision – cutting and pruning

A good gardener will go to drastic lengths to make their plants fruitful. When we lived in Niagara on the Lake we had many people who came to our church who were farmers that grew grapes for the wine industry. I learned a lot about tending grape vines when we lived there. The first thing you notice is how aggressively grape vines are pruned in the fall. They go from being lush plants with branches and leaves to basically being a stick. The farmers do not do this to hurt the plant, they do it to help it. The goal is to make the vine more fruitful. Cutting and pruning is important. So how does the farmer decide which branches to remove?

a. Diseased –

Sin is a disease in our lives and robs of us our fruit. When you are sick, your body uses up all its energy fighting the sickness within. A healthy body is one in which there is energy to work. Good farmers are able to identify sick branches and remove them before they destroy the entire tree.

Very large trees can be destroyed by very small things. In the last few decades there have been a number of invasive insects that have been destroying trees in Ontario. There is Dutch Elm Disease, aphids, carpenter ants, Asian long-horn beetles and moths. One of the pests we had in Brampton was the Emerald Ash Borer, there were signs posted around our neighborhood saying Notice: Emerald Ash Borer is in this neighborhood...

The Emerald Ash Borer is an invasive species of beetle which only feeds on Ash trees. The larvae burrow under the bark of the tree and eventually kill it. The beetle is native to Eastern Asia. In 2002 it entered the country as larvae in an untreated wooden container. As of 2015, all of the more than 30,000 Ash trees in Brampton were infected by it. As you can see from the picture, this beetle is very small. Ash trees are massive, yet every Ash tree will die within the next 10 years because of this tiny little bug.

A very tall tree can be brought down by a very small worm. Do you have any worms in your life stopping you from bearing fruit?

b. Divided –

Perhaps the tree was not really sick. Perhaps it was simply using all its energy and resources to grow leaves instead of fruit. In cases like this, pruning is required. Good farmers know how to make their plants more fruitful by removing unnecessary externals.

I mentioned that when we lived in Niagara on the Lake that I saw first hand how important pruning was. It is an essential part of owning grape vines. It is thought that the oldest living grapevines is located in the garden of Hampton Court Palace in London England. The vine was planted in 1768, making it 253 years old. The lifespan of a normal grape vine is about 20-25 years. This plant has a base that is 4 meters in diameter. Its longest branch is over 37 meters long. Every year it continues to produce over 300 Kgs of grapes that are sold in the Palace gift shop.

The reason this vine is still living and producing grapes today is that it has been cared for. Even though this plant is older than America, with proper care it continues to be fruitful.

We talked about the fact last week that sometimes we are divided in our commitments to Christ. We allow other things to crowd out our lives, and because of that we do not grow as we should. Sometimes God needs to shake us so hard that only that which is unshakable will remain. There have been times in my own life when God has had to do this with me. Pruning is never an easy thing.

c. Dead –

Perhaps the tree was not sick or needed pruning, maybe it was dead. Dead trees do not produce fruit. A possible explanation for not bearing spiritual fruit in your life is that you have never given your life to Jesus.

In Kuwait we had purchased some new palm trees for the compound. The trees were planted and all seemed to be fine except one. It just looked brown and dry. When the seasons for dates came all the trees had big clusters of dates except that one tree. The one that was not producing fruit was that it had died. It still looked like a palm with brown dry branches but the tree had no life.

Whatever the case, there had to have been some reason why the tree was not bearing fruit. Often as Christians we are quick to point the finger at everyone else other than ourselves. Many believers will say "how can anyone grow in THIS church" or "if only the pastor would teach this or that then I would grow more". God has planted you in fertile soil. Everything we need for growth and vitality is around us. It is our job to do what we need to do to grow.

3. God's Design – remain in me (dependence)

God created us with the need to be connected. Like the story I began with today, it is not enough to just have the lights and switches. There needs to be a power source. We were created like electrical appliances, to work properly we need to be plugged in. This is how God created us. This was done by design. What God expects of us is dependence. Apart from Christ we are not simply half as effective or a quarter as effective. Apart from Christ we can do NOTHING.

If you doubt the fact that you were created to be connected, take a moment and poke yourself in the bellybutton. Every one of us has a navel, a constant reminder of the fact that we all started out life connected to another human being. You would never have been born if not for that connection, and you cannot live the Christian life without connection.

The nation of Israel was given a warning – but they chose to ignore it. Because of this they were “uprooted” as His chosen people. The unproductive branch was severed. The warning is the same which is given to us today. If we refuse to bear fruit in our lives then God may have to take Drastic steps to get us to a place of productivity. Ultimately, unless we are fruitful we will not be used as His witnesses in the world.

Matt 7:17 Every good tree bears good fruit , but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit . 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.

It is not our job to make the fruit. Only God can do this in our lives. It is not our power but our proximity that matters. Our job as Christians is to remain in the vine. As we seek Christ and His kingdom He will, through the Holy Spirit, produce change in us. So, what does it mean that we “remain in Christ?” It means that we stay connected with Him in relationship. It means we spend time in worship. We spend time in prayer and in the Bible. We spend time with Jesus.

The branch of the vine does not worry, and toil, and rush here to seek for sunshine, and there to find rain. No; it rests in union and communion with the vine; and at the right time, and in the right way, is the right fruit found on it. Let us so abide in the Lord Jesus -- Hudson Taylor

2 Corinth 3:18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The moon does not produce it own light. It simply reflects the light of the sun. Likewise we are called to reflect the goodness and glory of God through the love reflected through our lives. King David was called a man after God's own heart not because he was perfect, but because he had a deep personal relationship with God.

We see in this parable that the owner will not put up with lack of fruit forever. There will be a time when the owner will act and remove the tree from the garden. This is clearly seen in God's approach to the nation of Israel. It is also applicable to us.

Sometimes we may think that because we go to church or were born into a Christian home we are safe in the vineyard. Watch out:

Luke 3:8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' ... 9 The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

We were planted to produce fruit. We are blessed to be a blessing. God wants to touch the world through our lives. As people see the positive transformation (fruit) in our lives they will seek the one who can change their lives as well.

Jack Taylor was a pastor in Texas. When revival hit his church in 1970 over 3000 people came to Christ in 6 months. In 1974 he began a worldwide ministry as an evangelist, writing books and speaking in many countries. Within a few years he was facing burnout. One night he was speaking at a Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Houston. He went back to his hotel room feeling completely exhausted in ministry. He cried out to God in prayer, "Lord, if I have seen everything You have for me in my ministry ... then take my life and let me die. I am done. " The prayer was followed by silence and he fell asleep.

The next morning, Jack Taylor woke up hearing God's voice in his heart. He felt the Lord was saying to him, "Jack, I have answered your prayer and I am going to let you die... to yourself. I have seen your ministry, I have seen what you can do on your own. Now I want you to see what I can do through you."

That moment of honesty with God changed his life. He was never the same again. His ministry then became totally dependent upon God and no longer striving and sputtering in the self-sufficiency of the flesh. That is what God wants in all of us. God wants us to grow, He wants us to be fruitful. He will go to great lengths to help us become so. It begins with a decision to stay close, to be in relationship with Jesus.