

HARDSHIPS AND REFINEMENT, 1PET.1:1-9, JN15:2

Lessons from the Vine #2

◆**Intro:** [Urban T. Holmes III in *Spirituality for Ministry*.

Christianity Today] “Any good gardener knows that beautiful roses require careful pruning. Pieces of a living plant have to die. It cannot just grow wild. We cannot simply “celebrate growth.” It is more than to be regretted, it is tragic, that we seem to have lost the insight that growth in Christ requires careful pruning. Pieces of us by our intentional action need to die if we are to become the person that is in God's vision. We are not cutting away a cancerous growth, but making room for intended growth.”

◆That is a truly significant fact. In John 15 Jesus is talking about his people, believers. Last week we observed that God may send hardships to discipline his own like a loving father with his child. It is decidedly *not* that a believer loses his salvation for not working hard enough. The hardship is actually a “lifting up” and a “washing off”, a tending for our proper growth. Confession was our key spiritual practice.

◆**1.** This week we move on to another kind of hardship, one that has nothing to do with sin or deadness. Last week we focused on the need to get rid of sin (deadwood) for a fruitful life. This week Jesus’ parable speaks of removing green, leafy branches that have actual fruit! These now get cut back. It is decidedly *not* that a believer is getting “put in their place”, or “knocked down a peg” for their own good. But that **God prunes his children, perhaps with change, or with troubles, or hardships, for a fruitfulness that far outweighs them all.**

◆*“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by*

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day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” 2

Corinthians 4:16, 17, NIV.

◆ So here is lesson number 2 from the Vine: God will prune his children in order to increase the fruitfulness of their lives.

◆ He [“lifts up”] 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. (John 15:2, NIV).

◆ **A.** Keep this in mind: sometimes hardship is discipline because of sin. But not all discipline is hardship because of sin or wrong. People flock to the gym (well at least the first week of January, anyway) to work out, right? They are “disciplining” their bodies in search of the fruit of greater beauty and more abundant strength. Likewise sometimes hardship (workout) is removal of some good for the refinement of the better. As one horticultural bulletin noted:

◆ “The vine’s ability to produce growth increases each year, but without intensive pruning the plant weakens and its crop diminishes. Mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yields.”

◆ **B.** When it comes to grapes and also my faith life I cannot have both a lot of leaves and a lot of fruit. Now we’ve already observed that it is God’s full intention (v8) that we are very fruity... er, fruitful. We are on this earth to fill it with good deeds, and uplifting experiences of God’s goodness. God has allowed you to

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be alive today in part to add love and goodness into existence. Yes you! Therefore, in times of trouble, in addition to considering whether it is a correction of sin, consider whether it is a test of faith. What is a test of faith? It is a trial or hardship, a removing, or a pruning that invites me to surrender something more of myself to God's greater purposes.

◆*...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 1:3,4, NIV).*

◆Circle "mature". That means fully developed. Fully. Isn't that what you want?

◆**2. In my hardships God invites me to evaluate my life for areas to surrender to God for greater fruit.** Trials and hardships take many shapes. They may be as violent as persecution and the danger of life and limb as for African Christians today. Or they may be as quiet and behind the scenes as a challenge to tithe or write an orphan. What are some areas where God might desire or cause a cut back of some good thing for the sake of a better thing?

◆**A.** My priorities: Let's say you're retired and it has always been your dream to fish daily until The Maker calls you home. Fishing and being outdoors are not bad things. The fellowship you enjoy there with life-long friends are true

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blessings. However, God may interrupt your plan with a call to a mission project. He may plant this nagging thought in your head that there is still fruit for your life to produce for the Kingdom of God on the Earth. You shall have to decide if you will cooperate with that and let God prune some of your retirement freedom so that other fruit grows.

◆Your priority in life may include finding your dream job. Provided it doesn't contradict God's laws, that may be a noble desire. But God may want to prune those desires back. He may put you in another work place, that you are not so sure you like, but where there are people who need a friend, or need to hear that there is a God who loves them, or where there is a person who treats them with the value God sees in them.

◆This applies to communities as well. In a book that I've asked the council to read, Kevin Harney asks what we would we give up if it meant non-Christian people would be more attracted to us as a church?

◆Would we be willing to change the service times, say to 11:00 because unbelievers are more likely to be up? Or would we have to fight about it? Are you kidding preacher? I like the early service!

◆Would we let God prune our order of worship, the way we've always done it?

◆The furniture?

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- ◆ The music style? Would we play heavy metal if it attracted the unsaved? Well?
- ◆ Do we want people to enter a life-giving relationship with Jesus so much that we will give up things we enjoy and love, good things, for the sake of fruit of new salvations?
- ◆ **B.** My sources of significance: What makes you feel valuable? The fact that you're a great **ball** player? The fact that you're an **A-student**? The fact that you **look** so good? Is being athletic a bad thing, or being beautiful, or smart? Certainly not. But, let me ask you something? What happens when you're not in school anymore, or you don't play ball anymore, or this or that starts to sag or wrinkle? What then? What will be the lasting fruit of all your effort and time?
- ◆ Imagine this. The CEO contacts you. They have a **top position** open and you have just the skill set! We're talking big pay jump, house in the expensive neighborhood, new cars all the time. Of course, you'll be traveling a lot more. The company is international, you know. That's right up your alley! You love other cultures, and new places! The CEO also makes it clear that the top dogs don't work some puny 40hours/week. You should expect at least twice that. Course you'll have a cottage in Rhode Island, and... Did I mention you have 4 kids in elementary school? Progress. Success. Not bad things in themselves. But maybe God

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prunes you of those things, so that you raise children who are steady, loved, and on fire for God, when you could have been gone a lot, and have children who have heard about God, but have basically no interaction with him at all. And what they are doing with their lives does not include a concern for the Kingdom of Heaven or deeds/fruit that has any lasting effect in the next life.

◆**C.** My relationships: maybe it's your deep desire to be **married**, to have a loving life-partner. About a decade ago Marilyn Lazlo, missionary (at that time already over 30 years) to Papua, New Guinea, shared in our church about her work, and how God had called her to the Sepik Iwam people. How she'd had a comfortable life as a teacher. And how she'd always wanted to be married but never quite got around to it as a missionary in the jungles. She added, "I'm actually still available if anyone's interested!"

◆One particular **couple** realized that they were never gonna affect their neighborhood for Christ, unless they became actual friends with them first. Then they realized they had no time for more friends. All recreation time or rest time, was spent w family. It began to dawn on them that God was calling them to give up some good "leaves" and "branches" of some family gatherings to "branch out and produce the fruit of friendships with unbelievers! That was

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pruning! They liked the family habits and traditions they'd had for their entire lifetime!

◆ There are lots of ways God may begin pruning, or invite pruning. The question is whether we will trust him and bear the kind of fruit that's important to him, or pursue the fruit we want more.

◆ **3. In my trials, God invites me to look past them into his future.** On a visit to two California vineyards, author Margaret Feinberg discovered that vintners must adopt a long-term approach to their work. According to Feinberg:

◆ "The first year a vintner plants **shoots** of vines rather than seeds because these yield the strongest vines. At the end of the first growing season, he cuts them back. A second year passes. He cuts them back again. Only after the third year does he see his first viable clusters of grapes. Serious vintners leave those clusters on the vines (They don't pick them). For most vintners, it's not until year four that they bring in their first harvest.

◆ For those growing grapes for winemaking, they'll bottle their harvest, but won't taste the fruit of their labors until year seven or eight. Most vineyards in Napa Valley, CA won't reach a breakeven point for their investment until year fifteen, eighteen or beyond."

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◆ You see friends, God invites his own to take the perspective of a vintner! God has a much larger plan than the mere moment you are in right now! If all you do is live in the moment alone, any sense of hope is very short lived. Live with one eye on future and the difficult moment won't look all that daunting! That's what Peter is talking about!

◆ *v3 Jesus death and resurrection gives us new birth and hope!*

◆ *v4 You, believer in Jesus, have an eternal inheritance safe in heaven*

◆ *v5 full salvation, the redemption of mankind and also the creation itself is on the way.*

◆ *v12 like the prophets of old, who struggled and taught, and wrote, and preached... they knew way back then that God was bringing about something fantastic through the Christ, but they didn't know how. They didn't know the story we know. They knew their lives were serving future generations of God's unstoppable family!*

◆ *v12 Even angels don't know all the beauty God is up to!*

◆ We Christians are not like everybody else. We don't live for the same things. We act in the here and now but we're invested in the there and then!

◆ **Conclusion:** Where are you facing some kind of hardship? Might it be not so much discipline as God pruning for greater fruit? What good might be the enemy of the better in your life?

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Could you accept 1,2,3 years of being cut back for the prospect of a really great harvest of grapes? Ask God about it. Look for it.

◆ Listen, according to Peter, we have a living **hope**. We have an **inheritance** that no market crash can affect. We have **salvation** and the joy now of what's still coming later. And remember this, there is always fruit where there is connecting to the vine. It may not be right away, if fact likely not. But the best wine takes the longest time.

◆ *"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." James 1:12, NIV.*