

The fruit of discipleship

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[0 : 00] Well, this picture that will appear behind me in a second, there we go, is taken only a few kilometers from here at Kruitt Constantia Vineyard. And you see it's a picture of rows and rows of vines, grape vines, which of course look really pretty and they are the stuff of, you know, postcard photographs.

But of course that's not their purpose. The purpose of these vines isn't to look pretty. You know, a person doesn't buy all of that expensive land and plant all those vines just for us to come and take pretty photographs.

These vines are planted for a purpose, a very practical purpose, to produce grapes which will then obviously go on to produce the fine wines that are sold from that estate. And so each of those vines and its branches is intended to produce fruit.

Now vineyards were quite common in Israel. It was one of ancient Israel's main agricultural products, wine and grapes.

And that's why Jesus, here in this passage, John 15, uses the imagery of a vineyard to teach very important lessons about discipleship. What it means to be a disciple and how disciples, just like branches in a vine, are also meant to produce fruit.

[1 : 13] They're not just meant to look pretty, and most of them didn't anyway. They're meant to produce fruit. They have a purpose. There's a purpose Jesus called them to himself. So he says here from verse 1, I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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.

And then he goes on to tell the disciples he's talking about them as the branches and him as the vine. Now immediately, right off the bat, that's a really challenging teaching, isn't it?

If we were listening to that passage, and if we understand what Jesus is saying, it's a hugely challenging teaching for any of us who call ourselves Christians or disciples of Jesus.

Because what it's saying is that the reason Jesus saves people out of this world and makes them his disciples and grafts them into his body, the church, is for them to produce fruit.

He doesn't save people for no reason. Jesus intends and expects every true disciple of his to be producing fruit in their lives.

[2 : 20] Which means that if you are not producing any fruit, you're not a true disciple. It's as simple as that. That is the plain message of Jesus here. He says in verse 8, he says, This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

A disciple shows that they are a true disciple by bearing fruit. That is what Jesus is teaching in this passage. And so what we need to do this morning is ask two very important questions.

First of all, we need to ask, what is this fruit that we're meant to be bearing if we're disciples of Jesus? And secondly, how do we do that? How do we bear fruit? So those are the two questions I want us to tackle this morning.

Firstly, what is this fruit that Jesus is talking about here? That disciples are meant to be producing? What is the fruit? Now to understand just what Jesus is talking about, it's important to notice that he calls himself the true vine.

And there's an interesting detail there. The true vine. He doesn't just call himself the vine. He calls himself the true vine. Now what's the difference? Well, for Jews, especially the Jews he was talking to, this vine picture that he was using, this analogy of a vine, had much more meaning to a Jew who knew their Old Testament than it typically does to us today.

[3 : 45] It's not just a convenient illustration. Because in the Old Testament, you may have picked it up earlier when Adrian read Psalm 80. In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was often referred to as a vine, God's vine, which he has planted in the earth.

So I'll read some from Psalm 80 again. Verse 8 to 9 says, You transplanted a vine from Egypt. This is a prayer of praise to God, recognizing what he has done in Israel's history.

You transplanted a vine from Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. And it took root and filled the land. It's talking about the nation of Israel being rescued from Egypt and being planted in Canaan.

And we've just been reading in our evening services through Joshua, where we saw that happen and how it happened. But God didn't just plant Israel there to live however they wanted and to do whatever they wanted.

He planted his people there for a purpose. What was that purpose? Well, if we read the Old Testament, we find out what the purpose of saving this bunch of slaves from Egypt was and making them into a new nation, the nation of Israel.

[4 : 59] What was the reason? Well, God already told Abraham, their forefather, the reason. He said, Through your offspring, all nations will be blessed. So God intended Israel to be a blessing to the nations of the world.

Later, he told them in Exodus, after he rescued them, he said, You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And then later on through the prophet Isaiah, He says, I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.

Okay, so it's in those and other verses we discover the reason that he rescued the nation of Israel and planted them in this earth. It was to bless the whole world, to be a holy priesthood, a nation that would represent God on this earth, who would bring God's words to this world, to be a light in the darkness, to bring lost people back into a relationship with their creator.

That was the purpose of the nation of Israel. But sadly, we read on in the Old Testament, don't we? And we discover that they failed in that purpose.

Psalm 80 goes on, Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire. At your rebuke, your people perish. So the nation of Israel failed their mission, to be a light to the Gentiles.

[6 : 16] And that's what that psalm is implying. And they became, we read in the Old Testament, they became no different to the nations around them. They weren't a light in the darkness. They became absorbed into the darkness.

And so God gave them over to those pagan nations. And we know the rest. But that wasn't the end of the story. Listen to how the psalm goes on.

It says, Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man that you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you. Revive us, and we will call on your name.

Okay, so we're going through this little snapshot of Israelite history, which is represented here in Psalm 80. And it's important, by the way. It's not just boring history.

It's important to understand what Jesus is saying here in John 15. And we discover that there's a plan. Still, God knew that Israel would fail. And he planned, he planned that there was going to be a man, the son of man, to come and succeed where Israel failed.

[7 : 21] To succeed in being the fruitful vine that Israel failed to be. So that's where we're left off in the Old Testament. And now, here comes along Jesus in John 15 and says, I am the true vine.

And now we understand just what he means, don't we? He's not just using a convenient illustration. He's referring to Israel's mission in the Old Testament that they failed, and how he has come to fulfill that mission.

And then he goes on to say to his disciples, You are the branches. And so he is saying, essentially, in that phrase, I am the vine, you are the branches. He is saying that he has come to plant a new people of God in this world.

A new people of God who will bear the fruit that Israel failed to bear. And that's why Peter, who was there listening to Jesus say these things, later writes in his letter to the church, 1 Peter, he writes this to Christians.

He says, You now are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

[8 : 34] That's 1 Peter 2.9. And it's talking to the church, the body of Christians. And that, therefore, is the fruit that disciples are meant to produce.

The same fruit that the vine of Israel failed to produce, which is to declare the praises of God to the world, and be a light to represent God to the world, and bring people back into relationship with their creator, to be a blessing to the world, to the nations.

And we do that, we've discovered. We do that by taking the good news of Jesus to other people, and helping them to understand what Jesus did, that they may have their sins forgiven, and come back to God in real relationship.

And that is the fruit that we've been called out of this world to produce, if we are disciples. The fruit of mission, the fruit of conversions of souls. Out of darkness into light.

And Jesus, therefore, goes on to say, verse 16, I chose you and appointed you that you might go and bear fruit. Fruit that will last. Go and bear fruit.

[9 : 47] Not just sit at home and bear fruit. Or sit in church and bear fruit. This is not where we bear fruit. This might be where we get watered, so we can grow and be more effective in bearing fruit.

But the fruit we bear is when we go out there, that's where we bear the fruit that we're called to bear. As we declare the praises of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world.

And that's also why Jesus goes on, you may have noticed, to talk about persecution from verse 18. The world hating the disciples. Now why does he, he's just talking about bearing fruit, and then he goes on to this topic of persecution, and telling the disciples that they'll be hated and all of that.

Why? Because the type of fruit that these disciples are called to produce is fruit that is going to result in persecution. Now you're not persecuted for just living a good life, are you?

You're persecuted for representing Jesus to the world around you. You're persecuted for talking about Jesus to your friends and family and neighbors. That's the fruit that he's talking about here, which will lead to persecution.

[10 : 59] And which all true disciples will, in some way or another, be involved in producing. And those who are not producing that fruit, they're just wasting space in the vine.

You know, in those Quirate Constantia vineyards, if a vine is not producing fruit, they don't leave it there to look pretty, they cut it out. And Jesus says the same happens to people, disciples, who are not producing fruit.

They are cut off. And that's not me speaking. That's Jesus. And so, if that's true, we better be asking ourselves, how do we do that? How do we go about bearing this fruit that Jesus calls his church to bear?

And that's the second question. How do we make sure that we as a local church, here at St. Mark's, are not just a bunch of fruitless branches? Well, Jesus goes on to tell us. And he gives us, in this passage, four secrets to Christian fruitfulness.

Things that will ensure that you and I are fruitful branches. So, let's see what they are. Firstly, we see in verse 1, the first secret to fruitfulness is pruning. Pruning.

[12 : 08] And this is not so much something we do, as much as something God does to us. He says, I am the true vine, my father is the gardener. 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.

Okay, so in order to ensure that his vine is producing fruit all the time, the vine keeper, God, does two things.

He cuts off some branches, and he prunes others. Now, this was a familiar concept for anybody who kept a vine in ancient Israel, or today. If you're a vine keeper, every winter you would go through the vineyard and cut off the branches that didn't produce in the last harvest.

The harvest would be summer, and then you would see which are the fruitful branches and which aren't. So in winter, you would spend your time cutting off all the useless branches. But then, that's not the end of your job. In the springtime, just before harvest, you would go back along the healthy branches and check for growths, any useless kind of growths and things which are sapping their resources, which aren't going to produce fruit, and you would prune.

You would cut them off. It was known as cleaning or pruning the branch to make it as productive as possible. And Jesus says that's what God does to his people. His fruitful branches.

[13 : 29] Those who are producing fruit, he prunes them to make them even more fruitful. How does he do that? Well, in many ways, in circumstances in life, through trials, because pruning is not always a painless process.

But primarily, from this passage, we discover the way he prunes his people is through his word, the Bible. Because Jesus goes on to say the very next verse, he says, you are already clean or pruned because of the word I have spoken to you.

So that word clean that he uses is the same root word for the word prune. It was the word to describe how a vine dresser would go and clean and prune the branches.

And the teachings of Jesus to his disciples have done that to them. They've challenged and refined his disciples to make them ready to bear fruit in this mission that he's giving them, which they're about to go on to do after his death and resurrection.

But it's not just them. You see, the same happens for his disciples today. As we hear his word, as we take time to sit under his word like we're doing this morning, it challenges us, doesn't it?

[14 : 46] Well, I hope it does. And this passage certainly challenges us. It convicts us. It helps us to identify the areas in our life that need to be cut away to make us more fruitful for God.

The Bible is the primary way that God prunes us. These are God's pruning shears in your life. You see? And no, it's not always comfortable to be pruned.

You won't always want to come and hear this. You'll want to stay away on Sunday morning. You'll think it's just because you're tired and you've had a busy week, but it's actually because the devil doesn't want you to come and hear this and be an effective disciple of Jesus.

You'll not want to go to Bible study. You'll think it's just because you don't have enough time and you need a rest, but it's actually because the devil doesn't want you to be an effective disciple.

And he knows that the Word is going to be what prunes you and makes you fruitful. You won't want to open your Bible at home and do your quiet time. Why? Just because you don't have enough time? No, it's because the devil doesn't want you to be a fruitful disciple.

[15 : 53] And he doesn't want God to use His Word to prune you. But unless it does that, you won't be fruitful.

And unless you apply this Word to your life and change what needs to be changed in your life because of it, you won't be fruitful. And that's why, for example, in our Bible studies, one of the questions we always ask is what needs to change in my life because of this passage.

We don't just come to learn so we can know more and then go home. We come to change. That's why we open the Bible and read it. And so we need to ask ourselves every time we do that, how does this change me?

How does this challenge me? God changed me through this. And that's why we need to go to Bible studies because there's only so much we can cover on a Sunday morning. We need to go and open the Word together and ask each other and challenge each other, how does this change us?

Because unless you let it do that, you will remain an unfruitful branch in the vine and we know what eventually happens to unfruitful branches. That's the first key to Christian fruitfulness, pruning.

[17 : 05] Secondly, remaining in Jesus. Verse 4, remain in me as I also 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. Okay, so what does it mean to remain in Jesus? What does it mean to be in Jesus in the first place?

Well, it's talking about relationship. This language of being in Christ is always talking about a personal relationship with Him. Being in Jesus is not just acknowledging Him from a distance, not just agreeing with Him or acknowledging Him as some historical or religious figure whose principles you like.

That's not being in Jesus. Maybe that's observing Jesus or learning about Jesus, but being in Jesus is having an active, daily, personal relationship with Him.

In fact, later in verse 9, Jesus explains that remaining in Him means remaining in His love. He elaborates what remaining in Him means. It's a relationship of love between Him and His disciples.

[18 : 16] Now, what does that look like? It's an important question. What does it look like to be in a relationship of love with Jesus? Because we tend to associate love with, you know, warm fuzzies and feelings and emotions in this world.

We tend to think that's what love is. And we think that if we don't have warm fuzzies for Jesus, then we don't love Him, which leads many South African males particularly to feel guilty because they're incapable of warm fuzzies.

and often we think that's what loving Jesus must be like, but that's not the kind of love that Jesus talks about here. Not what the Western world defines as love.

Now, of course, it involves our emotions as all true love does to some extent, but the primary way that this love for Jesus is expressed, you know how it is here?

how is this love for Jesus expressed primarily? Through obedience. Obedience. Look at verse 9 and 10.

[19 : 20] As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love.

Just as I have kept the Father's commands and remain in His love. The kind of love Jesus is talking about is a love which is expressed in obedience. Obedience to His commands.

Just like He obeyed His Father out of love, so His disciples are called to obey Him as an expression of their love for Him. So if you want to know whether you are in Jesus, you need to ask yourself, do you love Him?

And if you want to know whether you love Him, you need to ask yourself, do you obey Him? Daily. Do you wake up and seek to obey Jesus?

Do you ask not, what do I want to do today? What is going to give me the most satisfaction and pleasure? But do you ask, what does Jesus want me to do today? What is going to please Him?

[20 : 20] Which of those two questions guides your daily life? Do you choose not to commit the sin that you want to commit because you want to obey your Savior more?

not because obedience will save you. It can't save you. Obedience can't save you from your sins which you've already committed. But, obedience is proof that you are saved.

That you do, in fact, trust and love Jesus. It's proof of salvation. And what's more, that kind of obedience, the kind of obedience that is inspired by love, is a joy, not a burden.

We want to, we delight in pleasing our Savior. That's why he goes on to say verse 11, I have told you this so that your joy, so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

So, obedience can be a joy, not a burden. And it's only, it's only when we get to that point of actually obeying Jesus joyfully out of gratitude and because we love Him, it's only when we get to that point of enjoying obedience that we can be fruitful for Jesus and be enthusiastic and motivated to keep bearing fruit in our lives because that's the second secret to fruitfulness, is remaining in Jesus, in that relationship of love.

[21 : 48] Thirdly, the third secret to Christian fruitfulness is love for one another, love for other disciples. Jesus says, remaining in Him means loving Him, which means obeying Him and then He goes on to tell us the primary command He wants us to obey.

What is it? Verse 12, to love one another. My command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Now, it's important to understand that this mission that Jesus gives to His disciples, this command to go and bear fruit in the world can't be done alone.

It can't be done as individuals because we all have different skills and gifts and circumstances. We saw earlier, different people use different gifts and circumstances to share Jesus in different ways.

But ultimately, we need to get together and help each other to bear that fruit, to do those things. And Jesus knew this. He knew that unless His disciples really love each other, they're not going to be able to work together and bear fruit together.

And that's why, you know, just spending time together as Christian brothers and sisters is important. It's important for our mission to the world. We don't just, we're not just meant to go out into the world and try our best.

[23 : 07] We're meant to first build relationships with one another so that we can do that together, that we can work together, that we can help each other, that we can pray for each other, that we can serve each other to make the body effective in bearing fruit.

and so, you know, having each other over for dinner, having each other over for brides, investing time in your Christian family and then talking about what we have in common, which is our relationship with Jesus.

In that way, we encourage each other, we spur each other on and are in a better position to work together for the gospel and bear fruit in the world. So don't neglect that time, that fellowship, that community spent with other Christians.

It's important for our mission, for our fruitfulness. Mutual love for each other is what holds the body together to make us effective in this world, to bear fruit.

My son, Alex, loves making Lego models and some of you with children or even if you don't have children, you might love making Lego models. And the thing about if you ever use Lego, the thing about Lego, like a Lego car, for example, is that it's made up of a whole lot of small pieces that support each other and connect into each other to make up the whole.

[24 : 23] Now by themselves, none of those small pieces, just lying there by itself is very useful. In fact, the only thing it's useful for is giving you intense pain in your foot when you step on it, when your son has left it out.

But you see, when held together, when those little individual pieces, useless by themselves, are held together, they form something that none of them could form by themselves. And that's how the church works as well.

Your fruitfulness as an individual is limited. You might just be a pain to other people to continue the illustration, but you might not. But as an individual, you can't really do much.

You know, you might not be an evangelist, you might not be a preacher, but as part of a bigger body, using your gifts to support and help others held together, we are fruitful together.

And the thing that holds us together is love. Christian love. That is why when Jesus gives this mission to his disciples, his primary command is not go out and share the gospel.

[25 : 33] Of course, he's given that command elsewhere, but his primary command, he knows that's only going to happen if we love one another first. That is the central glue that is going to hold the body together to make us fruitful.

Christian love so that we can produce fruit together. So that's the third secret to Christian fruitfulness. Finally then, the final secret is prayer in Jesus' name.

Listen to his promise to his disciples here. Verse 7, If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. That's quite a promise.

Verse 16, again, You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, and so that whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you.

Wow! We saw this already, didn't we? In John 14, this seemingly blanket statement to give you whatever you ask for in Jesus' name.

[26 : 37] But we already saw last week and in our Bible studies that this promise is in the context of this mission that he is giving to his disciples. So it's not just saying you can pray for a yacht and you'll get it. Sorry. He's talking about prayer according to God's will as we remain in him and share his desires and his goals and we align our lives with his plan, i.e. in his name.

That's what in his name means. It's doing his work for him according to his plans. It's then that he will give us what we wish for because what we wish for is what he wishes for.

Prayer is the key to that. And of course it's through the process of prayer and us praying selfish prayers and then realizing that they're selfish prayers because God doesn't give them to us and then changing what we pray for.

It's through the process of prayer not only that he achieves his mission in the world through answering those prayers but he changes our desires to line up with his desires. That's another benefit of the discipline of prayer.

God slowly changes what we desire. If you compared if you're a Christian and you've been so for a number of years and you compared the prayers that you prayed 10 years ago to the prayers that you prayed now you'll probably find a lot of differences because your desires and what you think is important and what you think you want in this world will have changed as you grow as a Christian as you're pruned.

[28 : 07] Now prayer is of course a vital part of our relationship with Jesus. Communicating with him as you go through your day is part of living that active relationship that I was speaking about earlier and it should be a vital daily habit in every Christian's life to have that relationship with Jesus through prayer.

But we also learn here prayer is vital to our fruitfulness as his disciples just as much as a soldier's communication to home base for air support is vital to him achieving his mission so for a Christian the church will not be fruitful we will not be fruitful without prayer.

St. Mark's will not be fruitful unless we get together and pray. you know we can do this until we're blue in the face we can preach sermons we can go out and share the gospel with people we can meet with people one to one but unless we're praying for God to work in that it's really all pointless.

And you will not be a fruitful branch unless you are praying for God's kingdom in your life and in the lives of the people that he has placed in your life.

And men especially husbands fathers prayer you've got to lead your families in prayer you've got to set the example of this because it does not come naturally for a sinful rebellious human being to pray to communicate with God it is a discipline and fathers you're the heads of your homes you need to lead your family in this discipline you need to show your children what it means to be a soldier of God by being on your knees in prayer for them to see because prayer is how you and your family and eventually your children as well will be useful and fruitful in this world.

[30 : 07] Prayer is how you will be involved in the greater things that Jesus told his disciples they would do. Prayer is how you will make your life have meaning as Robert Murray McShane says a man is what he is on his knees before God and nothing more.

And so there are the secrets to fruitfulness. I want to close by asking you this morning do you think we are going to be a fruitful church this year 2018? Are we going to bear fruit for the kingdom?

Truly loving each other making time to be together to practice Christian love to spur each other on to pray together to serve each other to study God's word together because that's how we are going to be fruitful for the kingdom.

Are we going to do that? Are you going to be involved in that? But maybe a more pressing question for each of us this morning is are you a fruitful branch?

I mean that's what we have got to ask ourselves based on this passage. We can't get away from asking that question. Are you a fruitful branch? every true disciple of Jesus must bear fruit.

[31 : 19] That is why he has called us. And so are you doing that? Are you bearing fruit? And if you know you're not, it's most likely because you're not attached to the vine.

You're not in real relationship with Jesus and you know it deep down inside. Maybe you've never been attached to the vine and experienced new life in Jesus. Maybe you've never been born again.

Well now is the time to change that. Don't spend one more day being a fruitless branch destined for the fire. Do something about it. Come to Jesus.

Attach yourself to him. Submit to him as your Lord and Savior and begin a fruitful new life in him today.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus we thank you for your teaching that does get right down deep inside. We thank you for being clear on this teaching of fruitfulness and how you expect and saved us to be fruitful.

[32 : 24] Lord help us to do that. Help us to identify those areas in our lives which are not being fruitful which are useless for the kingdom and Lord would you through your word cut them away.

Would you make us as a church more fruitful for you. Would you make us as individual Christians fruitful branches so that we would glorify you and that as we sang earlier you would glorify your name through us.

Amen.