

Life for the Soul

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: The Difference Jesus Makes

John 15:1-8

“Here’s a list of the people who know me best. Ask them if I am a Christian.”

A group of Christian missionaries came upon a small Amish village. Seeking a possible convert, they approached an Amish farmer and asked, “Brother, are you a Christian?” The farmer hesitated for a moment, excused himself and returned with a list of names. He handed the list of names on the paper to the missionaries and said, “Here’s a list of the people who know me best. Ask them if I am a Christian.”

Would people who know you best say you are Christian by the way you live your life? Does your life bear fruit?

The fruits of the Spirit are enumerated for us in Galatians 5:22-23: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” You will notice these fruits correspond to traits of character, and character results in corresponding behavior.

The goal of the Christian life is fruitfulness. In verse 8, Jesus announces, “My Father is glorified in this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” Jesus declares in verse 16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” Bearing fruit appears eight times in our lesson. Jesus is not merely talking about

bearing fruit by our own efforts alone. We do not produce fruit, we bear fruit in relationship to the vine.

We are examining this Christmas the seven “I am” statements by Jesus that originate from John’s gospel. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” (6:35), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the gate of the sheep” (10:7), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way, the truth and the life” (14:6) and “I am the true vine” (15:1).

A true vine correlates to something real or genuine. Jesus is the source of real life. Life is referenced by Jesus a total of 36 times in John’s gospel. In John 4, Jesus says he is the living water. Last Sunday, in John 6, we examined the passage where Jesus claims to be the bread of life. Here in John 15, Jesus compares himself to a life-giving vine. “Apart from me,” Jesus said, “you can do nothing” (15:5).

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (1:5). Remember, the goal of the Christian life is fruitfulness! Branches grow connected to the vine. Just as a branch derives life from the vine, so Christians derive life from Jesus Christ.

A branch maintains its life by a vital, organic connection to the vine. “Abide in me just as I abide in you”

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(15:5). “Abide” or its synonym “remain” is referenced ten times in a span of 16 verses.

Jesus utilizes an agricultural metaphor because Israel is heavily populated with grape vines. If Jesus lived among us today, would he say, “The Kingdom of God is like a computer program. Your output depends on your input.”

Perhaps Jesus uses this agricultural metaphor on account of its organic frame of reference. Nature teaches us how things grow. Organic growth depends upon the vitality of branches in relationship to the vine.

We sometimes reduce the Christian life to a mechanical series of techniques: Do this; don’t do that, rather than an organic relationship with Jesus Christ. The Christian life is not a mechanical compliance to a set of rules, it is an organic, vital connection to Jesus Christ. Jesus declares in verse 15, “I don’t call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.” What Jesus establishes with people as a matter of first priority is spiritual friendship.

People ask, “What do I have to give up to be a Christian?” When you come to know Jesus Christ, you won’t bother any longer with what you are giving up, because what you will receive will be far more compelling and substantial.

How do people change? Do they change by external force from the outside or from an internal dynamic that originates in the heart of a person?

Let’s suppose a couple calls me for marriage counseling. The wife

places the call and asks to meet me along with her husband. The couple arrives and the wife pulls out a list of grievances to recite to her husband. He, in turn, reacts by saying he had no idea these things bothered her this much. But he is willing to change, since he doesn’t want to lose her. “Okay, I’ll change. I’ll do anything you want me to do.” They go home and things are better for a time. Before long, I get another call. They’re having trouble again.

What happened? The husband didn’t really change. He complied with his wife’s wishes in a mechanical sort of way, but there was no real internal change. Once the threat of separation had passed, he snapped back to acting the same way he did before the visit.

The Christian life is not achieved by mechanical compliance with a set of rules, it is attained by cultivating a spiritual friendship with Jesus Christ. When Christ takes up residence in our lives, he institutes internal change by means of his Spirit rather than by external force.

When someone becomes a Christian in the church, we encourage him to attend meetings, join committees and help people in need. We urge him to eliminate glaring sins and break a few bad habits, but we give him the distinct impression that he can leave large parts of his life undisturbed. No wonder we find new believers who, years later, are not much improved from the way they used to be. Real change results from internal transformation, not external force.

Maybe that’s why the church in America is lethargic today, because

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our focus is technocratic and programmatic, rather than organic and spiritual. Real change occurs when we allow Jesus Christ to work in the interior of our lives.

Does the branch receive life from the vine because it is fruitful, or does the branch receive life because it draws life from the vine? Fruit is inevitable if there is a vital connection to the vine. The fruits of the Spirit are the by-product of a vital, organic relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is a second way we grow in these verses. We grow not only in organic relationship to the vine, we grow by pruning. You may not like this growth principle as much. “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” (15:2).

Shortly after Chris and I moved into our home, we asked an experienced gardener to help us with pruning. Our yard was overrun by gangly shrubs and overgrown rose bushes. She attacked our yard with pruning shears. She seemed to be assaulting our plants, not pruning them. When she was finished, the plants looked emaciated and lifeless. But the result of her pruning became apparent the following spring. New growth magically appeared on our overgrown rose bushes and shrubs.

Grapevines require careful pruning. Grapevines which are allowed to grow wild become unfruitful.

There are two seasons for pruning grapevines. The first occurs in the dormant winter season, any time after fall leaves drop and before buds break in early spring. A discerning gardener will cut the vine back, leaving the center stalk and last year’s new growth. Sometimes as much as 90 percent of the branches are cut away. If sap bleeds from the vine, a wise gardener doesn’t panic. Such pruning will not harm the plant.

The second pruning occurs during the growing season. An experienced gardener identifies the healthiest shoots on the vine and eliminates weaker stalks. Too many shoots will stunt the growth of the vine. The most promising buds receive the nourishment. Shaded leaves are pruned as well, since they will not receive enough sunlight for photosynthesis to take place.

The goal of pruning is fruitfulness. A gardener seeks maximum fruitfulness by not jeopardizing the long-term welfare of the vine.

Just as I didn’t understand pruning in my yard, so, Jesus says, you don’t understand spiritual pruning. If we are going to be fruitful Christians, Jesus must prune away the dead undergrowth. Some of us are all leaves and no fruit. Jesus wants to cut back old growth to allow for new growth.

C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity* (page 174):

“When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well (in the sense that some of his bad

“You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

- George MacDonald

habits are now corrected), he often feels that it would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly. When troubles come along—illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptations—he is disappointed. These things, he feels, might have been necessary to rouse him and make him repent in his bad old days, but why now? Because God is forcing him on, or up, to a higher level; putting him into situations where he will have to be very much braver, or more patient, or more loving, than he ever dreamed before. It seems to us all unnecessary, but that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing He means to make of us.”

I find I must borrow yet another parable, this one from George MacDonald.

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks on the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently, He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and doesn’t seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent

little cottage, but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

Let me speak to those of you who are Christians. Are you cultivating a friendship with Jesus or are you just busy with life? Are you consumed with making a living, running errands and keeping busy? Are you cultivating a friendship with Jesus? When you look back over your Christian life, do you see new growth? If not, I would suggest you focus less on being busy and concentrate more on establishing friendship with Jesus Christ through daily prayer, weekly participation in worship and study of God’s Word. In short, that you commit yourself to practicing what we call in this church the seven covenants of a disciple.

Let me address those among you who are our guests this morning. Perhaps you are new to this church or you are not a follower of Christ. You may be interested, but not yet committed. The Christian life is not fundamentally a set of rules to follow. The Christian life is friendship with Jesus.

