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Christians draw their life from Christ the same way a branch draws its life from the main stem of the grapevine. Jesus made the simple comparison that a person who is not united to Him is like a branch that has been cut off the vine. The branch quickly withers. It has no life of its own, but only lives in relationship to the vine.

Abiding

The purpose of the branch is to serve as a vehicle through which the vine expresses itself. The branch bears the fruit which the vine produces. Grapes do not appear on the trunk of the vine. The branches serve the vine by bearing the grapes. God has chosen to express His love and purposes in the world through people. Nonetheless, the fruit of a Christian's life comes from Him and comes only as a result of one's relationship to Him. Because of this relationship, Jesus said that God is glorified when Christians bear much fruit (John 15:8).

In this statement on abiding, Jesus also answered the great question of human existence: Why am I here? Human meaning finds its fulfillment in relationship to God. Because they were created to bear the fruit which God wants shown in the world, people feel cut off, lost, and isolated when they are not fulfilling their purpose. They may have no idea what their purpose is, and if told, they may not like or believe what they hear, but people everywhere know what it means to search for purpose and meaning. When cut off from God, however, people cannot fulfill the purpose for which they were created (Eph. 2:10). They cannot bear God's fruit unless they are as related and dependent upon God as a branch is to the vine.

A branch separated from its vine not only will fail to bear fruit on its own, but it will die. Jesus said that the presence of fruit, either good or bad, was an outward and visible sign of whether someone had a vital

relationship with God. The presence of fruit characteristic of the Father proves that a person belongs to the Lord (John 15:8). The opposite is also true.

In a sobering comment, Jesus insisted that a person's relationship to God, whether positive or negative, would have some visible sign:

"You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16-20).

Whereas good deeds may be imitated, the spiritual qualities which indicate the essence of a person cannot be. Where good fruit issues forth, good deeds will always be present. Where bad fruit festers, however, no deed can be good because of the underlying spiritual corruption which has motivated it.

Paul said that Christians are like wild olive branches that have been grafted on to a domestic tree, so the wild branches are able then to benefit from the richness of the good tree (Rom. 11:17). The quality of the fruit depends upon its root source. A wild branch may bear fruit of a sort just as a rebellious person may do what the world judges to be good. Monuments and testimonials, awards and honors, may all be conferred by a grateful world on some noble benefactor who at heart is corrupt. The quality of persons' lives, however, does not depend on the deeds they do but on the root that generates their deeds.

Paul understood that a bad tree—or person—can perform good deeds and still be a bad tree. He confessed, "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). Deeds of piety are only vain striving unless accompanied by a heart transformed by God. Jesus warned the religious community to beware the manner in which they practiced their piety. Religious devotion and good deeds can have their motivation in a variety of sources (Matt. 6:1-18). For an act of benevolence to be completely void of selfish motives, guilt, or other causes, it must be an act of love created by the abiding relationship with Christ. The absence of works of piety indicates an absence of genuine fruit (Jas. 2:14 *ff*).

By abiding in Christ, a person opens the channels by which God

feeds a soul and produces spiritual fruit. Spiritual nourishment occurs in a reciprocal process of obedience to the Lord and prayer. In keeping the commandments of Christ, Christians abide in Christ's love (John 15:10) and see their prayers answered (John 14:7,16).

Obedience

Obedience is not a condition for earning the love and hearing of God, nor is it a condition for being nourished spiritually by God. Instead, *obedience* is the means God uses to bestow love and blessing. Keeping His commandments is the way Christians are nourished.

Abiding in Christ involves the reciprocal situation of Christ's words abiding in the believer as the believer abides in Christ. More is involved than an intellectual awareness of Christ's teachings or a memorization of His sayings. Abiding involves life itself. If the life of the vine does not enter the branches, they die. Christ's words become the basis for living when they abide in the believer.

When the word of Christ abides in a believer, it becomes an integral part of life. Jesus compared it to the foundation of a house; without the foundation, the house cannot stand against the natural forces of wind, rain, and flood (Matt. 7:24-27). The house depends upon the foundation for support in time of need. For the word of Christ to be foundational in a believer's life, the believer must do what Christ has said. Christ did not deliver an arbitrary set of commandments to oppress His disciples; instead, His words were a gift of help and deliverance to preserve the believer.

To obey the words of Christ, however, one must have a firm faith in the One who spoke those words. Doing what Jesus says forms the outward and visible sign that a person actually believes Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Doing what Jesus says is the tangible demonstration that a believer loves the Lord (John 14:15,23-24). Obedience, then, becomes a conduit for receiving the love of Christ: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10).

Prayer

Obedience is the context in which God's Spirit nourishes the Christian. Obedience is also the context in which prayer has nurturing power. Abiding in Christ involves a closeness that only prayer can

bring. The power of prayer comes from the vine/branch relationship. The branch exists to express the purpose of the vine. The Christian exists to express the purpose of Christ. When a Christian prays, truly desiring the will of God, that prayer has incredible power.

Through His prayers, Jesus abode in the Father and the Father in Him. When the eternal Christ emptied Himself of His glory by coming into the world (John 17:5; Phil. 2:6-7), His oneness with the Father was maintained by Their Holy Spirit and Their constant conversation. Jesus had but one thing in mind in His conversation with the Father—that the Father should be glorified and His purpose accomplished. The prayers of a Christian in whom the fruit of Christ's Spirit appears brings glory to God. God empowers such a person with answered prayer.

Unfortunately, many Christians pray like anorexics eat! Some anorexics eat nothing at all, to speak of, and starve themselves. Christians deny themselves the nurture and power necessary to produce the fruit of Christ's character when they neglect prayer, the greatest privilege a Christian enjoys. A Christian who neglects the privilege of prayer is as self-destructive as a person who refuses to eat. By His atoning death, Christ opened the access to God and became our high priest making constant intercession for us. On this account the New Testament urges us to "draw near" (Heb. 10:19-22).

People with bulimia have a different attitude toward food. Rather than neglecting it, they gorge themselves on it. Then, immediately upon finishing the meal, they purge themselves of all that they have eaten. Food may be used for one's own purpose rather than the purpose for which God intended it. The same can be said of prayer. Praying is a fruitless exercise if it is only designed to gratify the passions and desires of the one who prays. While one form of spiritual immaturity does not believe in the power of prayer at all, another form of spiritual immaturity only regards prayer as a way of getting what one wants. Either of these attitudes toward prayer will fail to produce fruit.

Unless a person has a balanced view of the power of prayer, he or she really should not bother to read any more of this book. If prayer does not make a difference, then certainly nothing else makes any difference either. Of course, some folks argue that prayer awakens in them a concern and commitment to get involved in a situation enough

to make a difference. Others see the power of prayer in the way it helps them get in touch with themselves so that they can cope with life situations. Still others regard prayer as a way of touching base with God who, though He cannot interfere with the course of nature and human events, certainly wishes us all the best. These ideas of prayer are not what I mean by the power of prayer.

By the power of prayer, I mean those times when a situation is humanly hopeless, but God changes everything as a result of a specific request. The power of prayer is seen in the intervention by God in the natural course of events and nature. The scarcity of the manifestation of the power of prayer is in direct inverse proportion to the number of Christians who do not abide in Christ as our Lord desired. Yet, the power of prayer also occurs when we find peace with God even though our requests may go unanswered. The power of prayer rests ultimately in the awesome experience of free and open communication with God.

Prayer is not a magician's formula for obtaining power over the universe. A person who prays must surrender to the Power of the universe. The power of prayer may mean the miracle of Lazarus rising from the dead (John 11:41-44), but it may also mean dying a horrible death to accomplish God's purpose (Luke 22:42). Either way, it makes little difference for one who abides in Christ. Prayers are always for the glory of God. Through such prayers, Christ abides in the believer just as the Father abides in the Son.

Pruning

Jesus said that "every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2). For most of my early life I could not understand why people pruned their fruit trees. In South Carolina where I grew up, we produced an enormous amount of peaches. My mother used to take us to Watson's peach orchard to pick peaches. The trees were thick with peaches and luxuriant foliage, but each year the limbs were cut back to the trunk of the tree. I thought it was a waste. Why not let those limbs grow and grow and grow?

When I moved to Kentucky, our neighbors had a peach tree. They thought it was a shame to prune back the limbs every year, so they let the tree grow and take its own course. Instead of the strong, sturdy trunk of the trees back home, its trunk is thin and willowy. Instead of

the thick, lush foliage, its foliage is sparse and scraggly. Worst of all, instead of the softball-size peaches that covered the Watson's trees, its fruit is small and hard like golf balls and only speckles the tree here and there.

Pruning does not detract from a fruit tree's beauty; it enhances it. Pruning is not a punishment for a Christian; it is a reward. God is the vinedresser who prunes the life of everyone who abides in Christ and bears the fruit of Christ. Spiritual pruning enhances spiritual growth by removing whatever inhibits spiritual growth.

Through much of life we are told that things do not hurt. When our little cocker spaniel had its tail clipped, I was told it would not hurt. Other dogs have their ears clipped, and we are told it does not hurt. Show horses have their tails broken to look the part, but for some reason it is not supposed to hurt. Lies, lies, lies! Of course it hurts. All serious pruning hurts. The amputation of a leg consumed by gangrene hurts, but it saves a life.

For some reason, however, Christians seem surprised that spiritual pruning may be painful. Freedom from pain and suffering is a promise of a Christian's future glorification, but pain and suffering are a part of present sanctification. The pain of spiritual pruning is a result of our reluctance to give up whatever inhibits our growth. Christians do not like to be pruned any more than children like to receive shots. It hurts. Whenever the Lord prunes us, we lose a part of ourselves. Habits, attitudes, and thoughts are as much a part of us as our faces, arms, and legs. To have part of our spiritual being pruned is to lose part of who we are. Pruning changes who we are.

Without the pruning, we remain all foliage and no fruit. Since Adam and Eve, however, people have liked having plenty of foliage in their lives to hide behind. Spiritual foliage is an outward show. It covers up who we are sometimes. It creates a costume for being something other than what God wants us to be. Unless a Christian is careful, the show of foliage can become a substitute for the substance of fruit.

For some Christians, the foliage that requires pruning is "a form of godliness." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went into great detail to show the defect of false piety. The outward act of piety or the habitual practice of piety can be nothing but show if the spirit that motivates the piety is false. Jesus warned, "Beware of practicing your piety

before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1). In His discourse on piety and faith found in Matthew 6 and 7, Jesus hacked away at the form of religion to reach the substance of faith. Unfortunately, many Christians happily prefer to settle for the form.

The sobering danger of settling for the form of religion without the substance of faith was demonstrated by Jesus in perhaps His most disturbing act. Upon finding nothing but leaves on a fig tree when He was hungry, Jesus cursed the tree, and it died (Matt. 21:18-22). Today, most people ask why He did it. Scholarship is perplexed for want of an explanation since one would not normally have expected to find figs during the Passover. The disciples, on the other hand, asked a more elemental question: How did You do it? In His answer, Jesus immediately focused on the primacy of faith and prayer in daily life. The cursing of the fig tree was a living parable of the uselessness of form (leaves) without the substance of faith (fruit).

Something else beside foliage is pruned away to produce fruit. If the fruit tree has dead limbs, these limbs become a way for rot, disease, and insects to enter the tree and kill it. Unless the deadness is cut out, it will spread like a cancer until the whole tree is consumed. Left unchecked, sin extends its control over every part of a Christian's life. Sin prevents fruitfulness. Toleration of sin invites the introduction of other forms of sin. Sin is the enemy of the Spirit of God and prevents Christians from being like Christ. In Galatians, Paul says: "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would" (5:17). Part of the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is pruning out the sin in a Christian's life.

The greatest problem in dealing with sin rests in the human reluctance to recognize and confess its presence. We can deal with sin in theory, as long as it remains vague and nebulous. Few Christians have difficulty praying, "Forgive us of all our many sins." Somehow we even feel holier for admitting we are just like everyone else, and we all have many sins. It becomes more difficult, however, to confess what those many sins happen to be.

It is easier to recognize "all my sins" than to face the fact that I am a jealous person. It is easier to confess "all my sins" than to confess self-pity. It is easier to acknowledge "all my sins" in theory than to

deal with a single one specifically. As long as sin is nameless and faceless, we can continue to ignore it. Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit came He would convince the world of sin (John 16:8). Jesus knew that people do not want to face the fact of sin, even if it means their own self-destruction. Simply put, we do not want our sins exposed: "For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:20). If we willingly gave up our sins, the pruning would not be as painful.

Conviction of sin constitutes only one dimension of spiritual pruning. My grandfather had a next-door neighbor who had a huge apple tree, but some of its limbs were dead. My grandfather pointed these out to the man many times, but the man did nothing about it. Because he did nothing, disease set in, and the fruit became gnarled and worthless. Conviction of sin does not automatically result in pruning. Knowledge of sin does not force repentance. My grandfather's neighbor was willing to live with the facts. Cutting out the dead limbs was too much trouble. For many Christians, growing to spiritual maturity is too much trouble and conflicts with their selfish desires.

When Christians become stubborn and refuse to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, God deals more sternly with them. The metaphor of the natural process of growth and fruit bearing is left behind. God then deals with us as defiant children who have their own ideas about what they want to be. All of the imagery of fruit in the Bible is just a poetic way of saying that an apple tree is like an apple tree, and a Christian is like Christ. In talking about fruit, we should never lose sight of the fact that Christians are supposed to be spiritual chips off the old block; like Father, like Son.

Hebrews reminds us that God will go to great lengths to accomplish the pruning, with or without our cooperation. The pruning that results may be far more painful than should be necessary:

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor lose courage when you are punished by him.
For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegiti-

mate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:5-11).

The goal of God's discipline is to bring His children into conformity with His holiness which manifests itself as the "peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Even with the discipline of the Lord, however, some Christians have the will to resist pruning. Paul warned the Corinthians that Christians hopelessly bound to a sin that they refuse to give up will be removed from the world for their ultimate spiritual safety (1 Cor. 5:5). He flatly stated that this condition of unrepented sin had brought about both sickness and death in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:30).

The positive teaching of the New Testament in light of the prospect of discipline is for the Christian not only to cooperate with, but to long for, this miraculous work of God. We are encouraged to examine ourselves in a regular, disciplined fashion for glimpses of those matters in our hearts which are contrary to the Spirit of Christ (1 Cor. 11:27-32; 2 Cor. 13:5). Rather than being self-righteous in comparison to the failings of other Christians, we are encouraged to use their failings as warnings to ourselves and as guides for self-examination (Gal. 6:1).

The most important theme for sanctification which the New Testament sounds, however, appears immediately before the warning about discipline in Hebrews. It is presented as the positive alternative to what comes afterward. Looking to Christ exposes to our hearts what needs to be laid aside:

Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (12:1-3).

Christians do not overcome sin when they think about the sin. As often as not, they only become more attracted to the sin! Only by focusing on Jesus does the sin begin to lose its hold. By actively striving in a positive way to be Christlike, what is not Christlike can be pruned. It falls away like scales because the passions and desires of the flesh have been supplanted by the passions and desires of the Spirit.

Throughout the New Testament, we find the positive appeal for Christians to focus on Christ and be like God. Rather than being caught up in the transient glory of the world, which panders to the passions and desires of the human heart, the New Testament urges Christians to glimpse the eternal glory of God and the imperishable nature of godly affections. By his continual return to the greater reality of spirit, Paul could face impossible hardships and sacrifice luxury and advantage while declaring, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). When we open our lives to the Spirit of Christ alive in us, He begins to produce the fruit of His presence in our lives.