

Fruitfulness

John 15:1-17

Key Verse: 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."

Greg Smith was the head of Goldman's Sachs United States equity derivatives business in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Over the course of his 12 year career he has had the privilege of advising two of the largest hedge funds on the planet, five of the largest asset managers in the United States, and three of the most prominent sovereign wealth funds in the Middle East and Asia. His clients have a total asset base of more than a trillion dollars. However, this past week he resigned from his lucrative position in amazing fashion with an open letter to the New York Times. What would cause this guys who seemed to have it all quit? He left because he could not stand the moral corruption and climate of the company. The company's culture had changed over time until the driving force was greed and selfishness.

So what does this have to do with today's passage? Good question. Being successful, prosperous and fruitful drives many in our world. Why? Because it is part of our nature. In fact this goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 1 where we are told that being fruitful is the purpose of our creation. God said, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." (Gen 1:28) And so Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful people and have children who are fruitful and thereby extending God's love and influence throughout the world. However if we do not remain connected to Jesus, we lose sight of what is important and like everything else that sin has corrupted, even fruitfulness can be muddled and twisted. But through this passage I believe Jesus shows us what fruitfulness really means and how we can maintain it.

If you remember last week's passage ended with Jesus saying, "Come now, let us leave." Apparently, Jesus and his disciples left the upper room heading toward Gethsemane. On the way, Jesus begins another teaching about the true vine, the gardener, and the branches. His sudden change in topic leads us to believe Jesus may have been inspired as they passed a vineyard or maybe he saw the golden vine on the bronze arches of the temple gate. Whatever the case, Jesus is dealing with a very important topic: fruitfulness. Let's take a look at verse 1. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener." In this verse Jesus gives the last of his seven great "I am" statements and in so doing he compares himself to a vine. This would have been a familiar metaphor to the disciples, because vineyards were common in the region. And in fact God often referred to Israel in the Old Testament as a vine or vineyard. Psalm 80:8-9 say, "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. ⁹ You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land." God planted Israel in the Promised Land like a vine in good soil. He gardened it and took care of it as his treasured possession. However it didn't stay that way. The prophet Isaiah saw that, "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." (Isa 5:7) God wanted to see the fruit of justice and righteousness bloom through the lives of his people in his vineyard. This would glorify God, illuminating the world with his presence. However, Israel fell into sin and idol worship eventually becoming unjust and unrighteous. They failed to be the good vine that could bless the world. Many hoped that America would be a city on a hill revealing God to the world in our time. However these expectations have been dampened due to the sin and moral corruption we've seen throughout our nation, as in the beginning of the message. Therefore God sent Jesus as the true vine to fulfill what God intended for Israel. Jesus opened the way for mankind to have a relationship with God which is genuine and eternal. (Romans 8:3-4 says, "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.") Only Jesus can restore our relationship with our heavenly Father because he is the true vine.

Jesus refers to the Father as the gardener. God is the gardener who cultivates and protects the vine and vineyard. In fact, the Father is the owner of the vineyard who takes care of so that it can be as fruitful as it can be. The Father is so concerned with fruit that it is mentioned 8 times in 16 verses. And if you take a closer look a progression is seen in fruit bearing. Starting with: “fruit,” then “more fruitful” and finally, “much fruit.” The gardener is looking for his vineyard to become ever increasingly fruitful. Verse 2 tells us how the gardener goes about his business to make his vineyard more fruitful. It says, “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.” The gardener does one of two things either cutting or pruning. The gardener cuts off branches that do not bear fruit. These branches draw nutrition from the vine without yielding anything in return. The wise gardener cuts them off so that the vine’s nutrition may be directed to the fruit-bearing branches. In this way Jesus explains how God deals with parasites in the body of Christ. God cuts them off. Judas was an example of a fruitless branch. On the surface he appeared as a disciple of Jesus but he turned out not to be a true follower of Christ and thus was eventually cut off. What happens to the branches that he cuts off? Verse 6 stands as a warning, “If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” These branches appear to be connected to the vine but really are not. They do not have a relationship with the vine and eventually they wither and die. All they are good for after that is starting a fire. The “burned” branches refer to people professing to be Christians who, like Judas, are not genuinely saved and therefore are judged. Like a dead branch, a person without Christ is spiritually dead and therefore will be punished in eternal fire. (Mt 25:46) Judas was with Jesus; he seemed like a “branch.” But he did not have God’s life in him; therefore he departed and his destiny was like that of a dead branch.

If the gardener is not cutting he is pruning. When he prunes the fruitful branches, he cuts away healthy stems and shoots which detract from fruit production. My mom and dad love growing flowers. They have them all around their house. My dad will pinch off the small flower buds on his plants so that the larger flowers will get bigger and more colorful. This is the same things the gardener does. Here Jesus seems to indicate that even fruitful servants of God need pruning. It is the removal of things that are not necessarily bad, but detract from bearing the fruit God desires. Sometimes pruning can be painful. Spiritual growth requires painful discipline. (Heb 12:11) For me I believe that I went through some pruning a few years ago with my job. Due to certain circumstances, I was demoted at work and relieved of management duties. At the time it was very painful and humiliating. However God pruned certain duties from me so that I could be at home to take care of my family at a time when they needed me. To really receive this kind of pruning, we must accept God’s sovereignty in our lives. Pruning comes in all

How can we be fruitful?

The secret to bearing fruit is staying connected to the source of nutrients. We must have a vine and branch relationship with Jesus who is that source. Take a look at verses 4-5. “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.” We love flowers, we give them on birthdays, Valentine’s day and Mother’s day. However a cut flower will not last long. It is dying. So the secret to being fruitful is to stay connected – or to remain in Jesus. A laptop can run for quite a while without power. The newer the technology, the better the battery life but eventually it will run out. If you want it to last longer, you need to plug it in. This principal is the same for the disciples of Jesus. Fruitfulness is the result of Jesus’ life being reproduced in his disciples. The disciple’s job is to remain. Jesus hammers this word into his disciples. It occurs 11 times in this chapter and 4 times in this verse alone, so it must be important.

What does it mean to remain? What does it look like to remain in Jesus?

According to this passage those who remain in Jesus pray. Verse 7 shows us, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” What you find is that the more you remain in Jesus the more you talk to him. You just do. I found over the years that the more I love my wife, the more I speak with her about everything, because I view my life as connected with hers, and as Genesis says, we’re one. The same thing happens with God. The more that you remain in Jesus that unity with him grows, and that relationship is cultivated and nurtured and the result is the more you speak to God. It just happens. You may not even be consciously aware of it. You’ll begin to, as the Bible says, “Pray without ceasing,” or “pray continually.” (1 Thes 5:17) Then in the middle of your day, you just start talking to God. You bring a request before him, or people come to mind and you start interceding for them, or if you’ve sinned and feel convicted, and so you bring that before the Lord, or you thank him because he has provided where you had a need. To remain is to have a continuous relationship with your heavenly Father just as you would with your beloved spouse. To remain in Jesus means that we open the door of our heart and let him in because he is there knocking. (Rev 3:20) And the more we remain in Jesus and as our relationship cultivates, we begin to get on the same page as our heavenly Father and our prayers begin to be more in line with what he wants. When this happens we can ask for whatever we want and he will give it to us because what we want is what he wants. For example if my kids ask for software that helps them study better in school versus a new video game that distracts them from studying, which of those do you think I will give them? (pray to glorify God)

Another way to remain in Jesus is to meditate on his word. Take a look at verse 7 again. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” This time notice that Jesus focuses on his word by saying, “my words remain in you.” Here we see how our intertwined relationship with Jesus works. The more we read and meditate on God’s word the more it resides in our heart. When I was a younger Christian I would hear people share their testimonies and whenever a difficult time came, a Bible verse would pop into their head and give them comfort. This always aggravated me because it never happened to me. In fact I could never even remember any verses. The reason for this was, I really didn’t value reading God’s word. So I made a decision to seek God first and set up a reading plan to go through the Bible once ever year. When I did this something amazing began to happen. First I started noticing connections from verse to verse all over the Bible and how interrelated and connected the Bible is. And second Bible verse began to pop into my head. So when struggles would come, a verse came to my mind that would help me through it. But not only verses, even hymns. I remember a very surreal experience I had as I was doing a project start up in California. We were getting ready to run this block long machine for the first time. It was very complicated and dangerous. It was about 10pm and everyone was running around crazily and as I was waiting to get started I was walking back with my coffee and I started singing the hymn “Higher Ground.” Of course no one heard me because it was loud in there and I was singing to myself, otherwise people would have thought I went crazy. But this amazing peace came over me and I wasn’t frantic like everyone else. I didn’t even know that I had that hymn memorized. It just came to me. I believe that this is how Jesus remain in us. That is why it is a good idea to memorize verses.

Another way to remain in Jesus is to obey his commands. Take a look at verses 9-10. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”¹⁰ “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” The Father and Jesus have poured out their love for us already. This can be seen through our Father’s provision and sacrifice of his only son. Jesus remained in his father’s love through obedience by giving his life on the cross. It was not easy to obey, but out of his love - he did. Likewise we remain in Jesus’ love by obeying his commands. Obedience is the evidence of our love. We can say many things with our mouths, but the real evidence is in our actions. When we know that God loves us, we realize that his commands are good and they lead to life, not to our destruction. Would a parent tell their child to do something that would harm them? Certainly not a loving parent.

So what is the command that Jesus wants us to obey?

Let's read verses 12-13. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." And verse 17 tells us again just in case we've missed it, "This is my command: Love each other." This is God's highest command for us all. The Ten Commandments are summed up as love God and love each other. This is so important to Jesus that he makes it a command for us. If we are to be Jesus' disciple, we MUST love one another. This is one of the chief ways that we can be fruitful, that is to love each other. Our love is patterned after Jesus' love, which is patterned after God's love. We have heard this so many times especially in the second half of John's gospel. Just like remain, Jesus hammers into his disciples that they should love each other. Loving each other is not always easy because all of us are sinners and we are not perfect. The deeper we get to know each other the more opportunities we will have to offend each other. We can stay on the superficial level with each other and that way we can protect ourselves from being offended. But what we really long for are those deep loving relationships. And in the world they are hard to come by. So if we are going to be real and honest with each other we have to expect that at one point or another we will sin against each other. It is inevitable. However the way we overcome this is, by loving one another. Jesus commands it. This means when our brother or sister in Christ sins against us, we have to forgive them and return love instead of getting even with them. We are called to follow the command of God and that command is to love one another. Satan on the other hand does not want us to follow God's command and so he leads us astray which causes us NOT to love each other but instead to injure each other causing division and bitterness.

Jesus' love leads to friendship.(14) And when we are friends, he makes his business known to us. That means there is open communication between friends. Disciples of Jesus have to be more than just co-workers, they have to be friends. Co-workers implies a business like relationship, where you go to get the job done and go home to be with those you love. On the other hand, we like to hang out with our friends because we have common interests.

When we love one another we glorify God because we are producing the fruit that he wants. Verse 8 says, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." Jesus told his disciples "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (Jn 13:35)

What is the result of obeying Jesus' command of loving one another? Let's read verse 11. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The result of loving one another is true joy. So many times people offend us and it's so easy to hate them, or want to get even some way, but this never gives us any joy. The only way we can have true joy is to forgive and love one another. Otherwise we only harbor evil thoughts and then we fall right into Satan's trap. When one part of the body of Christ hurts, we all hurt. It's not about winning the argument, but about loving one another.

The reason I brought up Greg Smith at the beginning of the message is because I wanted to show how sins twists and distorts the good things God wants for us. As we know, God wants us to be fruitful, but our sinful nature twists what that looks like. The world wants us to think that being fruitful or successful means to get ahead by any means. So the business world takes being fruitful as making as money as you can. Now I'm not saying making money is bad, we all need money and many of God's people have had a lot of money. But when we make money at the expense of others it falls apart. Greg Smith left Goldman Sachs because he could not take it anymore seeing how the culture of the company changed from helping their clients invest and make money to intentionally misguiding their clients into investments that would make Goldman Sachs the most money. Their clients trusted them and Goldman employees referred to their clients as "Muppets," being controlled by Goldman employees. They laughed about this as they took their checks to the bank. This is just one example, there are endless examples. This is not the way to love one another. As disciples of Jesus we must love one another, for that is the fruit our heavenly father desires.