

“ABIDING & FRUIT BEARING”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

INTRODUCTION

The night before Jesus went to the cross He retired with His disciples to an upper room in Jerusalem to eat the Passover meal with them, institute the Lord’s Supper (Communion), and share His final instructions with them. Following their time together in the upper room they left for the *Garden of Gethsemane*, where Jesus continued to share His thoughts with them and pray. Jesus knew the words He spoke that night would echo in their hearts the rest of their lives — in time, the truth of His “deathbed conversation” would lead them to a whole new way of thinking. Jesus wanted His followers to know exactly how to live a “fruitful life” and understand what God Himself would do to make it happen.

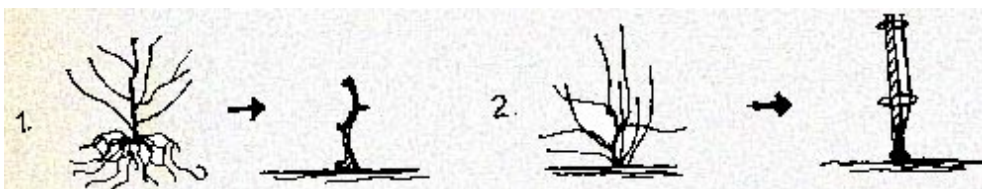
As they walked through the *Kidron Valley* to their final destination, they passed through an ancient vineyard that had been bearing fruit for generations. Here Jesus stopped and reminded them of how a vinedresser cares for his prized vineyard that it might produce a great harvest. Holding a mature grapevine branch in His hand, He said to them, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:1-2, 5, 8). It is abundantly clear from this passage and others that God wants us to “live fruitful lives” — exactly how that occurs is the subject Jesus deals with in John 15.

In order to appreciate the metaphor of the vine and the branches, let’s first look at some basic guidelines for the planting and pruning of a vineyard. Horticulturalist **Professor J. King** of *Washington State University* shares his insights for us — <http://extension.wsu.edu/maritimefruit/Pages/GrapePruningBasics.aspx>. He begins his presentation by stating the importance of three essential ideas when tending a grapevine:

- Pruning is best done in the Spring. If pruned too early, they may be damaged by a late frost.
- Don’t be afraid to cut. When you finish, about 90% of last year’s growth will be cut.
- Grape plants are vigorous and forgiving. Even if you make a mistake, you’ll get a chance to fix it next year.

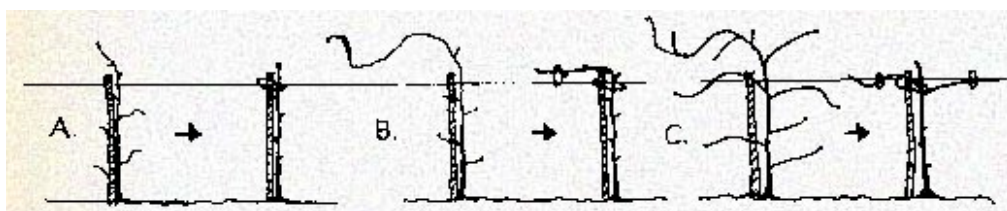
HOW TO START YOUNG PLANTS

When you get your new grape plant it probably will not be pruned; instead you will find a vigorous root system and a lot of bare shoots rising out of the top. At planting time in spring you should **reduce the number of shoots to one, and cut it back to three buds (Step 1)**. After planting, the vine will begin to grow, and push out new green shoots. When these shoots are 8–12" long, **choose “the best one” and support it by tying to a stake at top and bottom — look for a strongly growing shoot, upright or nearly so, coming directly out of the old stem (not from the underground root system). Remove the other shoots (Step 2)**. As the shoot grows throughout its first summer, **continue tying it up the stake to keep it straight** and prevent breaking in the wind. This shoot will be your **permanent trunk**, lasting the whole life of the vine, so it pays to keep it as straight and upright as possible.



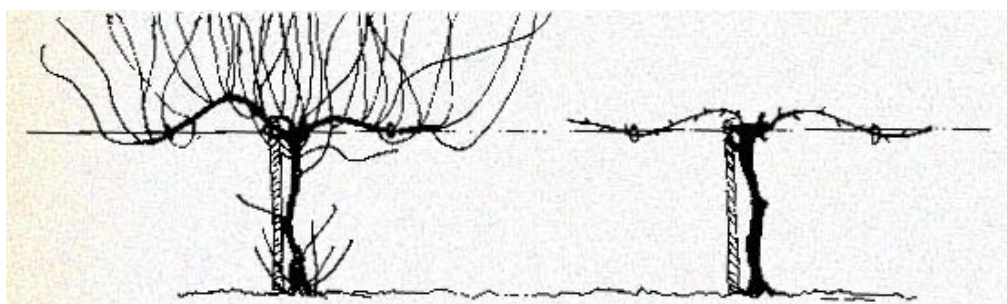
FIRST DORMANT PRUNING

Your first-year vine should have reached **to or above the first trellis wire (about 30")** during the previous season's growth. If it hasn't, cut it back again to 3 buds, and repeat the previous year's treatment. This may seem drastic, but necessary to **establish a sound trunk**. Most plants are vigorous and will reach the wire easily. If the last year's shoot just reaches the wire or a few inches beyond, cut it at the first bud above the wire and tie the shoot to the stake and the wire (**See A below**). If the shoot is longer, tie it to the stake and wire, cut the vine four or five buds beyond the tie, bend the remaining length of shoot down to the wire and tie it (**See B**). Very vigorous shoots may go well above the wire and put out strong side laterals. Choose the two laterals that are closest to the wire, tie them to the wire, and prune to 3-5 buds. Tie the main stem to the wire and stake, and cut just above the side laterals (**See C**). **During the summer**, train the new shoots up to the next wire, and remove any new shoots that sprout from the root area or lower trunk.



PRUNING ESTABLISHED VINES

Grapes bear fruit on the green shoots that arise from **one-year-old canes**. Pruning is based on producing fruit in the current season, and **renewing young canes** for the next year. The old canes that produced fruit this season will not produce fruit again. There are several methods used in pruning established grapevines. **Cane pruning** is the usual system in climates like ours up here in eastern Washington, where heat units may not be high and vigorous vines can shade the fruit. In this system a permanent trunk is established, and every year new canes are selected from the **head** (top) of the vine, where the trunk and wire intersect. One or two canes on either side, each **8-10 buds long**, are selected and tied to the wire, and all other canes cut out (see illustration below). Choose canes that are about the thickness of your little finger, that come out as close to the head as possible, and that have buds fairly close together. Try to avoid large thick canes with buds spaced far apart. Also **leave one or two spur canes, cut to two buds each**. They will provide additional canes to select from for the next year's pruning. The **Kniffen pruning system** is similar to cane pruning, except that the main trunk has two levels, one at the lower wire height and the other about 30" above it. In our climate conditions, however, the upper level shoots are often so vigorous that they shade out the lower level, so the kniffen system is not much used up here.



SHOOT THINNING AND TRAINING

In many areas with deep soils and high nitrogen content, grape vines are very vigorous and produce too many shoots. Even when vines are not too vigorous, some shoot thinning is usually needed to take out unproductive shoots with no fruit clusters, or those that are too closely spaced. The aim is to balance the productivity of the vine and the amount of leaf and shoot growth.

Each grape shoot needs **14 to 16 well exposed leaves** to properly ripen a grape cluster. If too many shoots are crowded together, the leaves do not get enough light for effective photosynthesis. It is important that all the leaves get good sun exposure, because shaded leaves only function at about 6% of their capacity, and may not be contributing at all to ripening the grape cluster. Thinning grape shoots in the early stages eliminates shoots that are unproductive and provides light and space for the productive ones.

- Begin thinning shoots as early as possible – in June or as soon as clusters can be seen.
- Shoots are soft and can easily be removed by hand – space the shoots 3" to 4" apart.
- If there is more than one fruit cluster per shoot, the lowest one (closest to the cane) will usually ripen earliest.
- Unless clusters are very small it's usually best to thin down to 1 cluster per shoot, especially if there are 3 or 4 clusters.

Training and tying the shoots upward on the trellis wires should also **begin fairly early**, to maintain spacing and keep the shoots from trailing on the ground or breaking off in the wind. Later in the season, if shoots are long and vigorous, with more than **14 to 16 active leaves**, shoots can be topped or cut back on the ends to prevent shading the lower vine. Also, new shoots may emerge where a leaf joins the main shoot. These side shoots should be removed. **Just before harvest** the lower leaves surrounding the grape bunches can be removed to provide better sun exposure. This helps to ripen the grapes and also improves air circulation, which helps to prevent disease infection

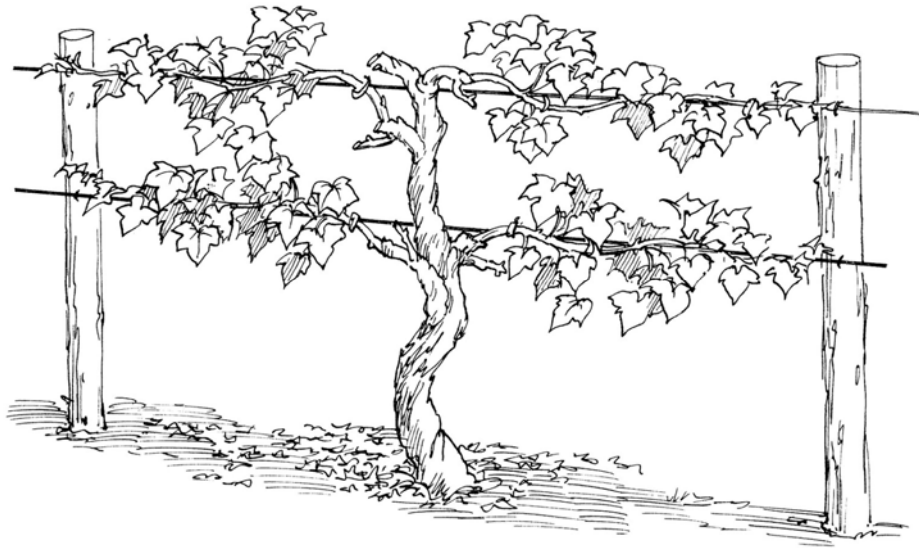
ARBORS

Grape arbors can add both **fruit and shade to the garden**. With their vigorous growth, grape plants will cover an arbor in a few seasons. For consistent fruit production, however, some judicious pruning is required. Basic guidelines are similar in that you establish a main permanent trunk going up over the arbor, with short laterals or spurs from which you select the new fruiting canes each year. If too many old, non-fruiting canes have accumulated, thin about half of them out completely. In most cases a lot of new shoots will result, to provide renewal canes for the next year. Follow these handy hints:

- Take time to **look over the vine** before you start.
- Pick out **several** well-placed canes that look like good prospects.
- Cut out old wood and canes that are obviously unsuitable – canes that are **small and weak**, or **too far out** from the main trunk. This will clear up some of the confusion as you go.
- Always **leave at least one alternative cane** until the last, in case you break one.
- Bend canes **gradually** into place before tying. Canes that grow in a direction other than where you want them can often be persuaded to cooperate by cracking them **gently**. Use both hands to bend the cane at the point where you want it to change direction, and apply pressure just until you hear the fibers crack.

Following are a number of sketches and pictures of grapevines that will help give you a visual understanding of the foregoing.

SKETCHES & PICTURES OF TYPICAL GRAPEVINES



Some of my produce...





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BELIEVERS ARE CALLED TO BEAR FRUIT

(John 15:1-11)

The cultivation of vineyards was important to the life and economy of Israel; as such, its imagery was familiar to every Jew (Ps 80:8-19; Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10-14; Hos 10:1). God “transplanted” Israel in Canaan and gave the nation every possible benefit — “What more could I have done to My vineyard that I have not done?” asks God (Is 5:4). If ever a nation had everything it needed to succeed, it was Israel... but the vine only produced wild grapes — instead of practicing justice, it practiced oppression; instead of producing righteousness, it produced unrighteousness. And when God’s own Son came to the vineyard, they cast Him out and killed Him (Mt 21:33-46). Incidentally, a golden vine even adorned Herod’s temple.

In the metaphor of the vineyard, Jesus gives us a picture to help us understand our role in bearing fruit for God — Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. In the metaphor of the vine and the branches in John 15, the earthly branches and vines teach us much about believers and the Vine of Heaven. The earthly vine is the “trunk” of the plant that grows out of the ground. Vinedressers traditionally keep them at waist height (3 to 3 ½ feet tall). The vine ends in a large gnarl from which branches grow in either direction along the trellis. The vinedresser’s task is simple — to coax from the vine’s branches the most pounds of grapes possible. Branches are tied to a trellis (or propped up off the ground with sticks) to let air circulate, to provide the maximum amount of sunshine, and to allow full access for tending. The reason Jesus shared this information with His disciples is that He did not want to leave them on earth wondering what God was doing in their lives, and why things probably weren’t turning out the way they expected. Scripture frequently refers to the “fruitfulness” of a believer’s life. Note the following —

- Let our people learn to engage in good deeds, that they may not be unfruitful (Tit 3:14).
- The righteous shall be like a tree planted by the water, bringing forth fruit in its season (Ps 1:3).
- Every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit (Mt 7:17).
- The tree is known by its fruit (Mt 12:33).
- We were joined to Christ that we might bear fruit for God (Rom 7:4).
- The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, self-control (Gal 5:22).
- I chose you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain (Jn 15:16).
- We were created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph 2:10).
- Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work (Col 1:10).
- The righteous will flourish and yield fruit in old age (Ps 92:12-14).

Warren Wiersbe says in his book, “Five Secrets of Living,” that we are either wasting our lives (being fruitless) or investing our lives (being fruitful). Jesus came that we might live an abundant life (Jn 10:10; Rom 7:4), and that can only happen when He is the lord of our lives. Jesus said “He is the vine and we are the branches, and that we are here to bear fruit” (Jn 15:5, 16). We have a “living relationship” with Christ — we are not simply members of a religious group — we are a living branch in the living Vine. When we yielded our lives to Christ, a living union was formed between us and God, and just as the branch gets its life from the vine, so the believer gets his life from Jesus Christ (Jn 15:5; Col 1:27)... and “fruit” is the result of that life. Just as every branch is inseparably linked the vine, so every believer is a partaker of the divine nature, and has the very nature and Spirit of Christ in him — as such, his one calling is to yield himself to a perfect conformity to Christ (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19). The reason God saved us is that we might bear fruit in this world (Rom 7:4) — by the way, branches don’t bear fruit for themselves to eat, but for “others” to eat. God did not create us to go through life getting; He created

us to invest our lives in *giving*. God has placed each of us where we are that we might accomplish His special purpose; as such, there is fruit to be produced in that little corner of the world where each of us lives that nobody else can produce. What is this *fruit* that God wants us to bear?

1. Winning others to Christ (Rom 1:13; Prov 11:30; Mark 1:17; John 4:35; 2 Cor 5:20). The ministry of leading others to Christ has many facets to it — all of us have the responsibility of sowing seeds and being ambassadors for Christ, even if we don't have the privilege of participating in the reaping.
2. Helping others grow in Christ (Mt 28:18-20; Eph 4:11-16; Col 1:28; Tit 2:1-15; Heb 10:24; Jam 3:1). Leading others to Christ is the first step in making disciples — they also need to be taught to observe all of the teachings of Jesus.
3. Practical holiness of life (Rom 6:22; 2 Cor 7:1). The Christian who abides in Christ and shares his life with others will produce the fruit of holiness.
4. Sharing what we possess (Acts 2:44-45; Rom 15:28; 1 Jn 3:17). We have all been made stewards of God's resources (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 17:7-10; 19:12-27), and have been given the responsibility of investing it in his eternal work.
5. Christian character (Gal 5:22-23; 1 Jn 4:19). The world manufactures entertainment and happiness to a degree, but it cannot manufacture true love and deep joy that comes from Christ. The world can purchase sleep, but it cannot purchase peace.
6. Good works (Mt 5:16; 1 Cor 10:31; Eph 2:8-10; Tit 2:14; 3:8, 14). Ultimately, the unsaved person cannot perform "good works" (he is dead as far as spiritual things are concerned) — he can only do "dead works" (Heb 9:14). Conversely, the believer is to be the eyes, ears, hands and feet of Jesus in this world.
7. Praising and thanking God (Heb 13:15). The Old Testament worshiper brought the fruit of his field for a sacrifice to God; whereas the New Testament worshiper brings the fruit of his lips to God — by our words we praise and glorify God.

For a vineyard to flourish, each individual branch has to respond to the attentions of the vinedresser, and as we will see, not all branches respond alike. By an act of faith we are to yield ourselves to Christ for the purpose of bearing fruit (Rom 7:4), and fulfilling the wonderful plan God has for each of us. The truth of the matter is, every branch in the vineyard is unique, and when harvest day arrives, it will be revealed that each of us will have produced a different-sized crop. Though the Lord works on each of us as branches to maximize our yield, we are each responsible to respond to His tending work. Jesus describes "four distinct levels of eternal yield" in this passage (Jn 15:1-11) — some branches are barren... some bear a little fruit... some bear more fruit... and some bear much fruit.

- *Basket #1 — No Fruit (verse 2a)*
- *Basket #2 — Some Fruit (verse 2b)*
- *Basket #3 — More Fruit (verse 2c)*
- *Basket #4 — Much Fruit (verse 5)*

Each of us as branches produce a clearly defined level of fruit — in the following discussion we will represent that level of fruit with a basket. Obviously, God is working in our lives in such a way that we might become increasingly more productive/fruitful; as noted above, that is the very purpose of our existence. **Dr. Bruce Wilkerson**, founder and president of "*Walk Thru the Bible*," says in his book "*Secrets of the Vine*," that he has asked audiences all over the world how they would describe the "fruitfulness" of Christians today — they consistently conclude that about half of all Christians bear very little or no fruit... a third bear some fruit... [ten percent bear more fruit]... and only five percent bear a lot of fruit (p. 26). Bearing fruit is the call of God upon every believer's life; it is our destiny (Rom 7:4). Let's take a look at each basket and its corresponding level of fruitfulness —

1. **BASKET #1 — NO FRUIT.** Jesus said, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away” (Jn 15:2). Though some have mistakenly interpreted this verse to mean that if you bear no fruit, you can’t be a believer, or that you lose your salvation, that is not at all what the Lord had in mind when He made this statement. It is important to first look at the phrase “*every branch in Me*.” The New Testament repeatedly describes the believer as being “*in Christ*” (1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:1; 2:6, 10, 13; Phil 3:9). This truth is central to Paul’s teaching throughout his letters. The fact is every believer experiences barrenness from time to time in life — we have all gone weeks or even a year without bearing fruit. Confused? Stay with me as we carefully examine what Jesus is saying here. First notice what He says in the following verse: “You are already clean” (Jn 15:3). What does He mean by the expressions “*no fruit*”... “*takes away*”... and “*already clean*”?

Let’s look at the word rendered “takes away.” This word “*airo*” in Greek is generally translated “*takes up*” or “*lifts up*.” For example, the disciples “took up” or “picked up” twelve baskets of food after the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:20)... Simon was pressed into service to “bear” Jesus’ cross (Mt 27:32)... and John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God who “takes away” the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). In both the Bible and in Greek literature, *airo* never means to “cut off,” so to interpret it as such is an unfortunate rendering because of its tendency to mislead readers. In order to develop the point Jesus is making, let’s consult with the horticulturalist and how the vinedresser tends the grapevine. Branches have a “*natural tendency*” to trail down and grow along the ground, but they don’t bear fruit when they are on the ground. When branches are on the ground the leaves get coated with dust and become muddied when it rains — as such, the branch becomes sick (mildewed and subject to fungus) and useless. By the way, there is not a single plant (when left to itself) that will not run amuck on the ground and need serious pruning. Branches frequently grow to eight or ten feet long, thus merciless pruning becomes essential — branches that are not yet ready to bear fruit are then cut back close to the stem that they might prepared to do so. It is only when everything that is not needed for fruit-bearing has relentlessly been cut back, that full, rich fruit can be expected.

But what about all of the branches that grow along the ground? What does the vinedresser do them? Cut them branch off and throw it away? No. He goes through the vineyard with a bucket of water and those branches that are on the ground *He lifts them up... washes them off... wraps them around the trellis or props them up... and pretty soon they start thriving.* Conversely, when we as Christians fall into the dirt, God doesn’t throw us away or abandon us — rather, *He lifts us up... cleans us off... cleanses us from worldly things that cling to us... and helps us flourish again.* Andrew Murray reminds in his book “*The True Vine*,” that it is not only our sin that needs to be cleansed, but our religious activity as well — anything that hinders us from bearing fruit must be washed away. As Murray says, “God has to bring us to the end of ourselves, and the danger of all that is of man; to feel that we are nothing.... All that is inconsistent with the most entire devotion to Christ’s service must be removed. The more perfect the cleansing and cutting away of all that is of self... the more intense can be the concentration of our whole being, to be entirely at the disposal of the Spirit” (pp. 28-29). God cleanses our lives that we might bear significant fruit unto all eternity.

For the Christian, sin is like dirt covering the grape leaves. Air and light (the Spirit and Word) are significantly restricted; as such the branch languishes and becomes fruitless. How does our Vinedresser lift us up out of the dirt and the mud? How does He move our branch from barrenness to fruitfulness? God does it by “*disciplining*” us; He uses painful measures to bring us to repentance. His purpose is to cleanse us and free us of sin so that we can live a more abundant life for His glory.

The Bible calls this process discipline or chastening (Deut 8:5; Heb 12:5-6). Discipline is what happens when our loving Father steps in to lift us away from our own destructive and unfruitful pursuits; its God's proactive answer to moving us out of barrenness toward fruitfulness. The author of Hebrews tells us that God is the source of the discipline, that He disciplines all believers, and that He always acts out of love (12:5-6). So "*discipline*" and being "*lifted up*" are correlative terms here. Is discipline a pleasant experience? No, of course not. "Chastening is painful and sorrowful... but it ends up yielding the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb 12:11). Thus, though painful, God's actions are all intended to nudge us — lovingly, wisely, persistently — toward the life and character we all desire but can't reach without His help. The believer needs to be mindful of the fact that the Vinedresser has only fruitfulness and abundance in mind when He tends to a dirty branch. And as soon as the branch is cleaned up and ready to thrive, the need for intervention ends. Though Satan would love to convince us that God sees us as worthless, unlikable losers, nothing could be further from the truth (Heb 12:5-8). By the way, if you're in the process of being disciplined, trade in your empty basket for clusters of luscious grapes.

The Word of God is the "knife" that God uses to prune and cleanse us — it is sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12). *Andrew Murray* says, "It is only when affliction leads to this discipline of the Word that it becomes a blessing; the lack of this heart-cleansing through the Word is the reason why affliction is so often unsanctified [unproductive]" (p. 31). Jesus said in John 15, "You are already *clean* because of the *word* which I have spoken to you" (v. 3) — God's Word does a spiritual cleansing in our hearts. Murray goes on to say that "the Father will do His blessed work of pruning and cleansing away all of nature and self that mixes with our work and hinders His Spirit" (pp. 32-33). As believers we need to yield ourselves to the blessed cleansing power of God's Word in our lives — in our study of the Word, we need to receive it as a *hammer* that breaks us... as a *fire* that refines us... as a *sword* that slays all that is of the flesh. The convicting power of the Holy Spirit ultimately cleanses us through the Word (Eph 6:17) — our part in the process is but to yield ourselves to the cleansing work of the Word, that His purpose will be fulfilled in us.

2. **BASKET #2 — SOME FRUIT.** As all vineyard owners will attest, grapevines frequently grow rampant with beautiful leaves but only a few grape clusters. This is the picture of the believer who "looks pretty good" to the casual observer, but whose life actually bears very little fruit. Jesus said, "Every branch that bears fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit" (Jn 15:2). God's strategy for coaxing a greater harvest out of His branches is to "*prune*," to thin, to reduce, to cut off. As contradictory as it may seem, the Vinedresser's secret for more is — less. By the way, the people who prune earthly grapevines must be carefully trained to maximize production. Some vineyards actually invest two or three years in training the "*pruners*" so they know where to cut, how much to cut, and even at what angle to cut. As a Christian, we have the Creator of the universe doing the pruning... even if your life is actually bearing some fruit, you need to know that God Himself is still going to intervene and do some significant pruning. The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer would be to let him alone, let him have his own way. Because God loves us, He prunes us and encourages us to bear more fruit for His glory. Your Heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you. His purpose is often to cut away immature commitments and lesser priorities, so as to make room for greater abundance for His glory. Vinedressers know that to get more from a grapevine you have to go against the plant's natural tendency — because the grapevine's tendency is to grow vigorously, a lot of wood must be cut away every year; grapevines can become so dense that the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form. Left to itself, a grape plant will always favor new growth over more grapes — though the growth may appear to

be impressive, it produces an underwhelming harvest. That's why the vinedresser cuts away unnecessary shoots, no matter how vigorous.

For the Christian, rampant growth represents all those preoccupations and priorities in our lives that, while not sinful in and of themselves, are keeping us from more significant ministry for God. Without pruning, growing Christians will only be able to live up to a fraction of their potential. Pruning is how God answers our prayers that our life please Him more and have a greater impact for eternity — to make room for the kind of abundance He created us for, He must first cut away parts of our lives that drain precious time and energy from what's truly important. So, if disciplining is about *sin*, pruning is about *self*. Many Christians struggle with anger and confusion because they mistake the process of pruning for discipline — they confess every known sin, but nothing changes; as such they slip into anger toward God, then into bitterness and mistrust. Vast numbers of believers are stuck in this misunderstanding, repeating the same detours, and getting the same painful results. As you look down the fence line of your life and see a number of branches being hacked off, and feel assaulted by circumstances, ask the Lord to clearly reveal what it is that He wants you to let go of. By the way, as **Bruce Wilkinson** reminds us in his book, *Secrets of the Vine*, the most fruitful and the most joy-filled Christians are the most pruned Christians (p. 69). It should also be noted — though every branch does not bear a bumper crop, every branch does produce some fruit (Mt 13:8, 23); there is always fruit where there is life.

3. **BASKET #3 — MORE FRUIT.** Horticulturalists tell us that growers prune their vineyards more intensely as the vines age. Since the vine's ability to produce growth increases each year, mature branches must be pruned hard to achieve maximum yields. The truth of the matter is most Christians never get this far because they are not really committed to reaching the next level of abundance. When Jesus told His friends what it would cost to follow Him — many turned back — the impact of those who didn't is still shaking the world today. Bruce Wilkinson finds it helpful to think of mature pruning in terms of the Bible phrase, "*the testing of your faith*." James writes, "Let the testing of your faith have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (Jam 1:3-4). In "*mature pruning*," the pruning will intensify as God's shears cut closer to the core of who we are. We must remember that God isn't just trying to take away, but is faithfully at work making room to add strength, productivity, and spiritual power to our lives. His goal is to bring us closer to the perfect and complete image of Christ.

Tests have nothing to do with the status of our salvation (that's a settled fact). Tests of faith are various trials and hardships that invite us to surrender something of great value to God even when we have every right not to. These tests make us feel assaulted or stretched by circumstances, but not judged or abandoned by God. The psalmist described this refining experience thus: "You tested us O God; You refined us like silver.... but you brought us to a place of abundance" (Ps 66:10, 12). When your faith feels pressed to the limit, it is important to remember that pruning is always the only and best answer to our deepest desires; it is the gracious, tender gift of an all-wise and all-loving Father. Every trial we face is an opportunity to let God work in our life for abundance — "God *causes* all things to work together for our good" (Rom 8:28); the main verb in that verse is a "causative verb" in the New Testament language of Greek, thus, God is "*causing*" all things to work together for good in the lives of His children. Jesus' conversation in the vineyard proves that God never intended pruning to be a mystery or confusing to us. Mature pruning is simply God's way of helping us put into practice His command to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt 6:33). God's goal is not to injure or harm us, but to liberate us so that we can pursue His kingdom. The apostle

Paul wasn't in the vineyard the night Jesus met with His disciples, but he became a veteran of extensive pruning — though he was of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, and a Pharisee with unsurpassed zeal (Phil 3:5-6), by the end of his life he had become a man who had been pruned until there was nothing left of his “self-life” — everything in his life had been pruned away. Thus he wrote from his prison cell near the end of his life, “I have counted all things loss and rubbish for Christ... forgetting what lies behind, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:7-8, 13-14). The truth is, Christians who have experienced deep pruning don't focus on what is left behind, rather they are given to courageous, hope-filled prayers to be all God wants them to be. Both Paul and Peter exhort us to have this “same attitude” (Phil 3:15; 1 Pet 1:6-8).

4. **BASKET #4 — MUCH FRUIT.** *Bruce Wilkinson* shares his story of ministry burnout in his book “*Secrets of the Vine*” (pp. 89-93). He met with a highly respected leadership mentor and biblical scholar who had studied over five hundred Christian leaders' lives (biblical examples, historical figures, and contemporary people) — here is what he told Bruce: “You're right on schedule.” He then proceeded to tell him that there are two sources of fulfillment in your life: your relationship with God, and your competence in ministry. He went on to say, “When you first began to serve the Lord, your relationship with Him was young and vibrant; it had to be because your competence was weak... but over time your competence increased... and pretty soon it became apparent to all... you had never been more productive for God... but your walk with Him began to suffer... and your satisfaction dropped.” He then said to Bruce, “The Lord is saying, ‘Put relationship with Me first... and you will find the joy that you're now missing, and so much more.’” Wilkinson life had born a good amount of fruit... he was not being lifted up in discipline... he was not being pruned... he was being caught between two opposing tensions — an increasing desire to produce an even better yield, and decreasing fulfillment. God didn't want Bruce to do more for Him... He wanted Bruce to be more with Him.

In Jesus' final remarks in the vineyard, He turned the disciples' attention away from activity altogether, and spoke about their need to “abide in Him” — “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me... [you really need to know], without Me you can do absolutely nothing” (Jn 15:4). Here's the point — if your life bears a lot of fruit, God will invite you to abide more deeply with Him. Again, His purpose is not that you will do more for Him, but that you will choose to be more with Him. Only by abiding can you enjoy the most rewarding friendship with God. We speak of a man's home as his “abode” — to “abide” means to dwell, to remain, to stay closely connected. With this picture Jesus is showing the disciples how an ongoing, vital connection with Him will directly determine the amount of His supernatural power at work in their lives. In this passage (Jn 15:1-11), the word “abide” (*meno*) is used eleven times. You can sense the passion and poignancy of His plea — Jesus knows that He is about to leave His friends, yet He says, “We must be together.” He knows that in the coming years, these downcast, frightened men will be called to produce an unheard-of, miraculous amount of fruit — enough fruit to turn the whole world upside down. And Jesus knows they can't begin to achieve that kind of eternal impact without the one thing they need most — more of Him.

“Abide” is an imperative — not a suggestion or request. The reason you command someone to do something, is because it's not going to come naturally. In the seasons of chastening and pruning, the Vinedresser is proactive... but with abiding, we must act. As **Andrew Murray** says in his book “*The True Vine*,” we have to trust and obey... detach ourselves from all else... reach out after Him... cling to Him... sink ourselves into Him — except we abide, we cannot bear fruit.

The Lord has called us away from ourselves and our own strength, to Himself and His strength. The relationship He seeks to establish with us is an intensely personal one; therefore our chief thought and aim must be to get our heart fixed on Him, to be exclusively devoted to abiding in Him (pp. 35-46). Jesus goes on to say, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch (indicating the loss of fellowship), and dries up (he and dries up (he withers and dies and becomes of no spiritual use)... and is burned” (Jn 15:6; 1 Cor 3:10-15; 1 Pet 1:7; 4:12). In keeping with the teaching of other passages, obviously this could not refer the loss of salvation (Jn 6:39; 10:27-30; Rom 8:28-39; Phil 1:6) — therefore, it either refers to a person who was simply a “professing Christian” (that is, one who pretends to be a follower of Christ but who has never truly born again — Judas is often used as an illustration)... or it could refer to a believer who gets out of touch with the Lord, and as a result embraces some sin that ruins his testimony; as such he is excommunicated from the community of faith. Whatever the case, his unwillingness to “*abide in Christ*” (in even the most minimal way) makes him of absolutely no spiritual use; and just as a fruitless branch is useless, so is an unfruitful believer. It is a tragic thing for a once-fruitful believer to backslide and lose his privilege of fellowship and service. If anything, John 15:6 describes divine discipline rather than eternal destiny. It should be noted that Scripture does teach that a believer can “commit a sin that leads to death” (1 Jn 5:16).

Notice the implied promise for the branch that “does abide” — if you stay connected to Christ, if you draw spiritual nourishment from Him... if you allow the power that flows through Him to flow through you... nothing will hold you back from reaching the most abundant life possible. So, unless our friendship with God becomes our “*first priority*,” we will never ultimately fulfill the potential of our true destiny as believers or leaders. *Intimacy with God* must be our first priority in life — not just praying and studying His Word and serving in some capacity. Many of us have become experts at *serving God*, but have remained novices at *being His friend* (which is infinitely more elusive). Writes Wilkinson, “As far as I can tell, the great majority of God’s people... fail to reach the level of ‘*much fruit*.’” Undoubtedly, the most startling symbol of abundance in the Old Testament is this snapshot of what the spies found in the Promised Land — “They came to the *Valley of Eschol*, and there cut down a branch with *one cluster of grapes*; they carried it between two of them on a pole” (Num 13:23). Keep that snapshot of supernatural abundance in your mind, because that is the portrait of fruitfulness God has in store for you! As branches in the Vine, we have the privilege of abiding and the responsibility of bearing fruit (Rom 7:4).

Abiding is the secret of fruitbearing. The branch does not bear fruit by struggling, but by abiding. How do we “*abide*”? Two things are necessary for abiding: Surrender and Cooperation — Yielding and Obeying. The apostle Paul describes this cooperative work in his letter to the Philippians: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, *but* work with the realization that you work not alone, for God is at work in you, both to will and to do His good pleasure.” Abiding involves spending time in *the Word*, *meditating upon it*, and *praying*. Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask what you will and it shall be done for you” (Jn 15:7)... and, “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in Me” (Jn 15:10). Obviously, you cannot keep God’s commandments if you don’t know them, and you can’t know them apart from His Word. The fruit-bearing believer “delights in the law of God, and meditates upon it day and night” (Ps 1:2). *Confession* is another factor in abiding: “If we say that we have fellowship with God and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (1 Jn 1:6). To confess one’s sins literally means to “agree with God about our sins;” therefore it means to fully concur with the law of God in our heart. David even asked God to be cleansed from “hidden faults” (Ps 19:12). The fruit-bearing believer keeps short accounts with God — he doesn’t wander away from God for long periods of time. Yet another factor in abiding is *desiring to do God’s will* — the psalmist David said,

“I delight to do Thy will, O my God; Thy Law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8; Mt 6:10; Mk 14:36). In summary, it is the Holy Spirit who encourages and enables us to abide — He teaches us the Word; He enables us to pray; He reveals our sins; and He gives us the inward desire to obey God. The Spirit uses the Word of God and prayer to strengthen our communion with Christ.

The healthy life of the believer in Christ is one of “unceasing prayer.” Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you” (Jn 15:7). Thus we can only fulfill our calling to bear much fruit by praying much — when we genuinely abide in Christ we are continually aware of His presence and our need of Him, and are constantly dialoguing and communicating with Him. Jesus said, “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit” (Jn 15:8). As believers, we bring glory to God by allowing His glory to shine out through us, and by yielding to Him in obedience. The fruitfulness of a vineyard tells of the skill and care of its owner; thus the owner is glorified by an abundant harvest — the Father is glorified when we bear much fruit. The world around us is perishing, and the majority of Christians seem content with bearing little fruit; as such, we need to give ourselves to *much prayer* that God would give us *much fruit* to bring to men. As **Andrew Murray** says, “God’s children are feeble because there is too little prayer. We bear so little fruit because there is so little prayer... [therefore] let us labor and strive in prayer until the blessing comes in power” (p. 63). If we abide (note the caveat) we can ask *whatever we will* and it shall be done for us (Ps 37:4). Believe in the truth of this promise, and set yourself to be a fruit-bearing intercessor for men, ever calling down more blessing (1 Chron 4:10; Ps 37:4). The secret is to be wholly occupied with Christ — do not be occupied with abiding; be occupied with Christ.

Abiding is all about the most intimate relationship of your life. In abiding you seek, long for, thirst for, wait for, see, know, love, hear, and respond to a person. More abiding means more of God in your life, more of Him in your activities, thoughts, and desires. In our Western-style rush to *perform for God*, we often falter at the task of simply *enjoying His company*... yet we were created to be dissatisfied and incomplete with anything less. In the words of the psalmist, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so soul pants for You, O God” (Ps 42:1). If our need for this relationship is so deep and essential, why do so few of us fervently pursue it? One of the primary reasons, says Bruce Wilkinson, is that “*we really don’t believe God likes us.*” We believe God likes us in a theological sense (“God loves everybody!”), but we don’t feel particularly *liked* by Him. We just naturally assume He is disappointed and displeased with us (and rightfully so), so how could He possibly like us? That, my friend, is the primary message of Satan and the flesh — the devices of Satan are doubt, distrust, discouragement, and deception. Satan tries at every turn to prevent or steal our harvest, and keep us from reaching greater fruitfulness. The truth of the matter is, *God loves us unconditionally!* Again, I refer to the words of that wonderful hymn by **Charles Wesley**, “*Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?*” Jesus goes on to say, “Just as the Father has loved Me, *I have also loved you* (emphatic!); abide in My love!” (Jn 15: 9) — believe it! reside in it! and enjoy it! (Jn 15:11). Until you believe God really loves you, you will continually experience bouts of depression, discouragement and despair.

Though abiding begins with visible “spiritual disciplines,” such as Bible reading, prayer, worship, fellowship and service... yet we can do these things for years without abiding. Reading a book about a person isn’t the same thing as knowing a person. The challenge in abiding is always to break through from dutiful activities to a living, flourishing relationship with God. Draw near to Him daily... make God your constant companion in life... take Him with you everywhere you go... develop a continual awareness of His presence, and a continual God consciousness... keep short accounts of wrongs done... diligently strive to walk in obedience and love (Jn 15:10)... and affirm His love for you numerous times

every day. It was **Brother Lawrence**, a seventeenth-century lay Christian who worked in a monastery kitchen, who described his practice of abiding in God this way: “I do nothing else but abide in His holy presence, and I do this by simple attentiveness and a habitual, loving turning of my eyes on Him. This I call... a wordless and secret conversation between the soul and God which no longer ends.”

Warren Wiersbe says in his book *“Five Secrets of Living,”* that it is *“obedience”* that ultimately leads to abiding... just as a *person* who obeys the laws of health abides in good health... and the *farmer* who obeys the laws of nature enjoys fruits of his labor... and the *scientist* obeys the laws of science is able to accomplish things... so also the *believer* who obeys God experiences intimate communion with Him. God has written certain laws and principles into this world, and we cannot disobey them without suffering the consequences. One reason we are facing *ecological* problems today is because we have not obeyed God’s physical laws. Scripture tells us that “whatever a man sows, this will be also reap; if he sows to the flesh he will reap corruption (barrenness), and if he sows to the Spirit he will reap eternal life (abundance)” (Gal 6:7-8). Commensurate with this truth is the realization that *“the will”* is the center of the Christian life — we obey God, not because we feel like it, but because it is the right thing to do. We need to move from obeying *because we have to*, to obeying *because we want to*. Jonah ultimately obeyed God, but deep within he still wanted his own way. “Doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph 6:6) is the kind of obedience God is seeking. Jesus said, “If you obey Me you will abide in My love — just as I have obeyed My Father and abide in His love” (Jn 15:10). “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn 4:34). “I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn 5:30). “I have come down from heaven not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn 6:38). By the way, Jesus’ obedience to the will of God cost Him His life (Phil 2:8) — likewise, we are also to die to self (Mt 16:24-25). Wiersbe says we never have to ask “Am I abiding in Christ?” because there will be several evidences in our lives when we are in communion with Him. He identifies six of them (Secrets, pp. 33-49):

1. **The first and most obvious evidence is “fruit.”** Jesus said, “He who abides in Me... bears much fruit” (Jn 15:5). If we are maintaining “close fellowship” with Him, then the results will be fruit, both in and through our lives — this means God will use us to touch the lives of others. The truth of the matter is, you may not be conscious of all the fruit you bear; you may have to wait until you see the Lord in glory before you will know the fullness of all your fruit. If you are growing in holy living, and experiencing victory over temptation, then you are abiding in Christ. Bearing fruit unto holiness (Rom 6:22) is a daily process, not a finished matter. As we grow in Christ, we conquer new areas in our lives. If you find yourself growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, then you know you are abiding in Christ. Conversely, the Christian who is not abiding in Christ is selfish — he misses the joy of bearing and sharing.
2. **The second evidence is that you are “being pruned.”** Jesus said, “Every branch that bears fruit, the Father prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (Jn 15:2). God is always at work in us so that we might reach our full potential. To be sure, God has different plans for each of us, but those believers who abide in Christ can *“expect to suffer.”* The Father’s knife is ready to cut away anything in our lives that is keeping us from bearing more fruit for His glory. The Father may *hurt* us, but He will never *harm* us — His pruning is always for our good and His glory. As we experience a deeper relationship with Christ, we will experience a more invasive pruning process, where God cuts away things that you thought were good. *“Why, Lord?”* is the prayer often on the lips of the one who is abiding, and God’s answer is, *“I want you to bear more fruit.”* The abiding Christian doesn’t choose between good and bad... he chooses between good and the best. Expect to be pruned if you are abiding in Christ, because that is the only way to bear more fruit and bring more glory to the Father.

3. **The third evidence is a “growing sense of weakness.”** The Father often has to remind us that we are “*branches*” and not the Vine itself. He permits us to go through circumstances that accentuate our weaknesses and His strength. He repeatedly teaches us “without Him we can do nothing.” This is one reason for the testings we experience in life — God often tests us in our strongest points to keep us mindful of how much we need Him. Abraham, Moses, David and Peter were all tested in their strong points and failed, thus revealing how truly weak they were. As Wiersbe says, “*After you have been abiding in Christ for a long time, you may be tempted to feel stronger than you really are.*” You may feel capable of handling life in your own wisdom and power. Beware! You are heading for certain failure!” Jesus said, “Apart from Me — you can do nothing!” But in Christ you have all the strength you need to bear fruit and glorify God. *Our weakness is our strength* — God will see to it that we are reminded of our weakness “that the power of Christ may dwell in us!” (2 Cor 12:9).
4. **The fourth evidence is that of “answered prayers.”** Prayer is not a “religious exercise” that we perform out of obedience; rather it is the very breath and heartbeat of our lives. Prayer is a part of an intimate relationship with God where we share our heart with Him and grow in love and faith... and it is interrelated with His Word: Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask what you will and it be given to you” (Jn 15:7). As we read the Word, we discover God’s will, and we start to desire what He desires: “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4). If you are abiding in Christ, and His Word is abiding in you, then you will pray in His will and He will answer (1 Jn 5:14).
5. **The fifth evidence is “love for Christ and His people.”** Jesus said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you” (Jn 15:9, 12). God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16), and if we are sharing His life, we will experience His love and express His love to others. The danger is that we get so wrapped up in having a relationship with God, that we become self-centered and isolated and neglect the people around us — such kind of abiding is false. The closer we truly get to the Lord, the more we will share His love with others. As we abide in Christ the “*fruit of the Spirit*” will increasingly appear in our life, and the most preeminent fruit is that of love. Peter writes, “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8). The test of love is “sacrifice” — Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). *Agape love* is a love that gives, that sacrifices, that willingly pays the price that others might be helped.
6. **The sixth evidence is an “inner joy.”** Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (Jn 15:11). Christian joy is not the absence of trouble; it is a deep peace and confidence in the midst of trouble. Jesus in His greatest hour of testing was able to give His joy to His disciples — it was a joy in the midst of sorrow. The world offers entertainment and a degree of happiness, but only Christ can give joy; and this joy comes from our abiding in Him. As David said, “*In Thy presence is fullness of joy*” (Ps 16:11). Writes Paul, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). One of the first symptoms of backsliding — not abiding in Christ — is a loss of joy. When David sinned “his body wasted away and he groaned all day long” (Ps 32:3); when he finally confessed his sin, he prayed: “*Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation*” (Ps 51:12). Spiritual joy is only experienced when we abide in Christ.

Here, then are some of the evidences that we are “abiding in Christ” — we bear fruit for God’s glory... we experience the Father’s pruning that we might bear more fruit... we have a sense of weakness and know that we are only branches, and that Christ is the Vine... we have our prayers

answered... we love the brethren... and we experience a deep joy in spite of circumstances. To be sure, writes Wiersbe, “not every abiding believer will have all of these blessings in the same degree at the same time, but they will all be present in some measure, and they will be strong enough to be evident... and others may see these blessings in us better than we do!” (Secrets, p. 49).

In closing, it is good for branches to examine themselves regularly to see if they truly are truly abiding in Christ. Reflect upon the following —

- **If you are in a season of *discipline***, the Vinedresser is reaching down to intervene in your life, to lift you up and bring you back to fruitfulness. He doesn’t see a chronic loser in you, but a chosen, carefully tended branch that is one choice away from an altogether better existence.
- **If you are in the season of *pruning***, the Vinedresser is wielding some rather serious-looking shears, but He’s not unhappy. He’s impressed with your energy and promise; as such He thoughtfully snips away unwanted shoots.
- **If you are in a season of *abiding***, the Vinedresser is looking at your branch with pleasure, satisfaction and joy. Just being near you and enjoying your beauty, is His favorite moment of the day. Huge clusters of grapes crowding your branch are exactly what He’s had in mind for you since your branch first sprouted.

Remember, you were created for a life-mission of “abundance” for God... but you can’t accomplish the work of His kingdom on your own. Though more is always possible, you will have to do something different from what you are currently doing — you will have to cooperate more with God and respond in obedience and trust.

— “Fight the good fight!” (1 Tim 1:18) —

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