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JOHN 15:1-8

John Series: Get a Life in Jesus

[PRAYER] Holy Spirit, we ask that you would fall upon this place in a new and fresh way today. We ask that you'd be that chain breaker. We ask that you would open up new windows for our lives so we can move forward. Work on those strongholds of our lives, we ask. We want to know you more. We want to serve you more. We want to love you more. Today, Lord, we're going to open your word again. As we do we ask that you'd speak to us through this passage. We open our hearts and ask that you would be preparing, we just ask your Holy Spirit to prepare the soil of our hearts for the word of God so that when planted in our hearts would bear fruit. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

That's a cute picture. Carrie and I went to the Tulip Festival this last week. A million tulips. Two million tulip bulbs planted here. You can see them as far as you can see. We just enjoyed walking around the different kinds of tulips. There are ones that look like carnations, they're so full. There's other ones with spiky little tips on them. And then there's regular tulips that we typically think of when we think of tulips, but they're all different colors. Some are red and some are pink. And then there's this whole row of variegated colors. They're all different colors. And we just walked around just enjoying it.

We learned a lot about tulips. We talked to a man who was from the Netherlands, from Holland, and he was describing how they care for tulips and how they dig them up every year, all two million of them so that they can take this little side bulbs out and sell them and then plant them all again. It was just fascinating to learn about the growth and care of tulips. Which is really interesting because it coincided with our passage today in John 15 where God is called the gardener. And we learn about the garden. We learn about not tulips, we learn about vines, and vines that are full of these grapes, and how grapes grow. I don't know much about grapes, but as I studied this week and learned about how the gardener cares for the grapes and the branches, it just became really relevant to our own spiritual life.

So today what I'd like you to do is I'd like you to think about who God is, who you are, and how you're related to God, and how He cares for you. Because that's what we're going to look at. This is like step back and look at your life kind of thing. Maybe some of you in the midst of this sermon will repurpose your life. You will re-center your heart. Because you get an understanding of what it's all saying here and what God wants for you.

This is God's word in John 15. Would you stand with me as I read these verses in John 15? I'm going to read verses 1-8. You can look at your own Bible or you can follow along on the screen.

Jesus is saying to His disciples these words – *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

You may be seated.

In John 13-17 we have what we call the Upper Room Discourse. I suppose we could say it’s like the graduation ceremony for the disciples. It’s their commencement speech and in it He’s giving them lots of instructions, guidance, giving them tools to move on in their lives, and what they need to do. And He’s going to tell them you’re going to experience some suffering and I want you to know how to deal with the suffering you’re going to experience. But I want you to understand your position. I want you to understand who you are. And if we can get this who we are in Christ part, then good things can happen to us inside. It can just help us understand what God has for us.

If we look at the passage, we say that Jesus starts with saying – *“I am the true vine,”* which implies that there must be some false vines. The vine is going to be this place where energy is drawn from in order to feed the branch. You and I are going to be branches, as it says in the passage. We’re the branches. We need to be connected to the vine. But the vine is this source of energy. And if you think about a vine, it’s got the nutrients, the water and so on, that are flowing through it to provide the fruit, the nutrients it needs so the fruit can be large, it can be productive and whatever it’s going to be. So He’s saying I am the true vine.

I got to thinking there are other ways we try to derive our energy for life that are not the ones that are most productive. We can connect ourselves to all kinds of things that we think can produce energy for us and they don’t. And those substitute vines are distracting. Jesus is saying let’s get back to basics here. I want you to know I am the true vine. I am the one you want to be connected to. You need to tap into the energy and the power that comes from being connected to the vine. So He starts by telling us about this vine, that He’s the vine, He’s the one where the energy is going to come from in our lives. But then He talks about the gardener. And He says – *my Father is the gardener.*

The gardener in a vineyard is the one who’s going to go through and tending the grapes, tying them up. If you go to a vineyard that’s not been cared for, you’ll know it. But if you go to a vineyard that’s been cared for, it will be obvious because all the vines are neatly tied up, they’re protected, they’re set up so well that the grapes aren’t hanging on the ground where disease would get them or where insects would bother them. They’re tended. They’re tied up. And there’s some very important things that we learn about the gardener in this passage that are helpful.

I want to draw some principles out of this passage and the first one I want to talk about is the gardener. We have to realize that God is in charge. Let's step back and look at life. We just need to know there's a gardener, He's God, and He's in charge. He knows what's going on. He's in charge and He cares about the plants and He's strategic in the ways He's tending you and me, and He wants them to be as fruitful as possible. That's what He wants. He wants you and me to be fruitful in our lives. And so He's looking at the branch and He's taking care of it. So this gardener has this care about Him that we can trust in.

It's important for us to recognize that there is a gardener because there is a tendency we have, I think, to be in control. And this desire to control gives us a sense of satisfaction. I'm in control and when I'm in control I feel good, and when I'm not in control I feel bad, anxious, angry, disappointed. But if I realize that God is in control, then I can release much of that so I can work in much of my life. That He is the gardener. He is in control of what's happening.

If we look at grapes and we see them being tended, I just gave you some pictures of some grapes here. This is fruit hanging from branches. You can see in this case that the fruit, the branches are tied around or hanging around these wires in a way that the fruit is cared for. Sometimes we're going to see in the passage that there's pruning that needs to take place. We'll talk about that today. Maybe your life is in a stage of pruning at the moment and you need to understand that a little more from the passage and what it's saying. I like this picture of the gardener because he's caring for, he's harvesting the grapes, but there's a sense in which he's careful. You're not alone in your life. That God is in control. He's caring about you. And the focus here is on the gardener, the one who is strategic about his relationship with you. Keep that in mind as we go forward here because we're going to start talking about branches. You and I are branches and we get stuck sometimes in the branches and what the branches are doing and we forget that there's a gardener. Let's keep the gardener in mind as we go forward.

We see in the passage first of all that God is in charge. He cares about the plants. He's strategic. We like control, as I said already, but sometimes when I talk to people I say this: You know I know you feel anxious because you're not in control. You wish you were more in control. But there's one thing that feels better than being in control. You know what it is? Giving it up. If we give up control, boy, there's something that really happens inside of our hearts that brings that peace that we need. We need to know there's a gardener. Principle number one Jesus wants us to understand is that He is the vine and the Father is the gardener.

Let's look at a second principle from the passage and that is the principle that our purpose is to bear fruit. Let's look back at the actual words of the text and notice where it talks about bearing fruit. *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes.* Go down to verse 4. *No branch can bear fruit by itself. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.* And then down at the bottom there. *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

Obviously the purpose is to bear fruit, but what is fruit? I remember looking at this verse years ago and trying to figure out what is the fruit? What is the fruit? It must be the fruit of the Spirit, I

thought. Because that's love, joy, peace, and those are the things that are produced when we're tied into the vine. That makes sense. I think that's true. It's the fruit of the Spirit. But it can't be just that. I don't think, according to this passage. I started thinking maybe it's the fact that we meet other people to Christ. The fruit of our work with people, that other people come to Jesus. I think that's true, but I don't think that's what this passage is specifically speaking about.

What is the fruit that He's talking about? I think He's talking about there's this fruitfulness that we come to be what we were designed to be. There's this... I think of the word success. I like the word success or prosperous, but then I don't like those words because they tend to focus in on money or business success and I'm not sure that is exactly what He's talking about here. I do think that Christians when they live according to biblical principles do better financially and generally are more successful in business and so on.

So I like those words, success and prosper. But they're limiting and I don't think that's exactly what he's referring to as fruit. So I'm attracted to the idea of being productive. The fruit is productive, it's producing. But I have to be careful personally with the word productive because I have a temptation in my life to measure my self-worth based on whether I was productive or not. So if I got my to-do list done or half of it done today, I can feel good about myself. And if I didn't, I feel bad about myself. That's the temptation I have. So I do think that people who are abiding in the vine, remaining in the vine, as the scripture says there, are more productive. But there's some limitations to that word productive that I'm not sure that's the best to describe what this fruit is. Maybe my thought is fulfilling or satisfying. I like those words because I do think when you're fulfilling your purpose with God that there is some sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that comes. Then I thought that's so me-focused, that I'm sure that's not exactly what He's talking about here when He talks about being fruitful. Because it's not just about me. It's about other people and God working through me.

So I come back to the word fruitful. That's probably the best word to describe. I think it has a lot of different facets and I think we can amplify those. But there's this being the person that God called me to be. Taking my strengths, dealing with my weaknesses, working through me. All that is this sense of thriving. If you see a branch that has grapes on it, we would say that branch is thriving. I think that's what He's talking about here when He says if you want to thrive you need to be tied into the vine. And then I remember several other passages of scripture that illustrate this with the same idea. Let's look at just a few of them.

The first one I want to show you is in Psalm 1. This is the one that says – *He delights in the law of the Lord*, first of all. And the person that delights in God's law this is how they describe this thriving: *This person is like a stream planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither--whatever they do prospers.*

Notice there is a stream and the energy is coming from this stream described in the previous verses delighting in God's word. And when someone delights in the scriptures and delights in what God has for them and His word then out of that comes this ability to thrive as a tree. *Yields fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither.* Because he's next to the source. That's the same thing being said in our passage about the vine and the branches.

Let's look at another one. In Philippians 2:14 we have the illustration from astronomy in the bottom. It says – *You will shine among them like stars in the sky.* But let's read up a little bit here. *Do everything without grumbling or arguing.* That's where we're going to start? Grumbling or arguing. The person who grumbles or argues is different than the Christian, is what He's saying. So a Christian doesn't do those things. *So that you can become blameless and pure* (satisfied you can have this fullness inside of you is the idea here), *“children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”*

We live with a lot of warped and crooked people, characterized by arguing and complaining. But you're going to be different. You're going to thrive as a star, then you will shine among them like stars in the sky. You are different. You shine. That's the same idea that we're talking about here about being touched into or connected to the vine itself and drawing our energy from the vines so we can be what God wants. We can shine, in essence.

From another aspect of science we come to Isaiah 40:31. *But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

You probably heard that there are eagles at Colonial Lake. That's the lake where I live on in Lawrenceville and there are bald eagles there. My neighbor said she saw three of them all flying at the same time. People come there now in groups. They've got binoculars, cameras, huge big ol' cameras taking pictures of the bald eagles at our lake. And I see the bald eagle perched in the tree and I enjoy watching him. But when he takes off, he is majestic. His wings are bigger than that, like six feet wide, as he's going and flying through. That's the picture used here to describe what God wants to do inside of our hearts. He wants us to experience this soaring, this flying.

How do we get that? Let's look at the verse. It says we *hope in the Lord.* When you hope in the Lord, that means you're tied into the vine. That's the same idea that's taught over and over in scripture. Where does your strength come from?

Oh that reminds me about a verse I memorized when I was three in Psalm 121. It goes like this: *I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.* Where does your help come from? Where does your strength come from? The scriptures are trying to remind us in many places to do what Jesus is telling His disciples – get your strength from the Lord and that's what's going to produce the fruit.

So the second principle from the garden here is that our purpose is to bear fruit. But I want you to know that your purpose to bear fruit is not your job. Your job is not to be fruitful, according to the passage. What the passage is telling us to do is to abide in the vine, to remain in Jesus. That's your job. When we abide in Jesus, the implication is that there's commitment, there's intentionality, there's time. I'm committing my time to do that. I'm going to abide. I'm going to keep thinking about getting my strength from God. I want to get my strength from the vine, not from these other places. The true vine that's mentioned here, that's where I'm going to intentionally find my strength. And that's really the message of the passage because that's what He's telling His disciples. Do that. That is your job. Don't focus on fruitfulness; focus on faithfulness.

Oh I need to remember that. When I start thinking about results, the results of my work or the results of my activity, if I'm not seeing the results that I want then sometimes I get frustrated because I wish those results are there and they're not. My job is to be faithful. To keep doing what I know to do, what God wants me to do, and I keep doing it over and over again, and I leave the results to Him. My job is not fruitfulness; my job is faithfulness. As I work on the faithfulness, it's God's job to provide the fruit. That's what He wants to do in my life. My job is to abide in Him.

Here's some verses that use that same term over and over again – *remain in me, as I also remain in you*. It's the same word abide or hang out there. *No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. Apart from me you can do nothing if you do not remain in me.* Verse 7 – *If you remain in me and my words remain in you...* Now we're reflecting back to the words of Jesus. So that gives us an idea in part of what this means, just like in the story in Psalm 1, just like the tree by the water, that we delight in God's word.

Maybe it's time to take out your Bible on a regular basis, be reading through, or like I do on my iPhone I turn on my Bible. I don't open it much anymore, I just turn it on, and I have there the scriptures for me to read. And doing that on a regular basis helps me to stay connected to the vine. I'm abiding. That's the job we want to do. We want to abide in the vine, as He's saying there. Which means that we're not doing things just to please people. We're doing things because it's the right thing to do. We're doing things because we want to be pleasing to God. And we're doing it for Him. We're being faithful, as Colossians 3:23 says. *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.* I'm doing the right thing because it's the right thing that God wants me to do. I'm focused on Him and what He's going to do. I'm being faithful. That's what we want to say. Can we say I am being faithful? Because if you're being faithful then the rest of this is all going to get sorted out by the gardener. The rest of this is not my job.

Which is why I think we need to talk about this fourth principle. Let's talk about pruning. Who gets pruned? Well look at the verse. Is it the person who's messing up, who's failed? Is it the person who's got sidetracked and doing the wrong thing? No, it isn't. Notice what it says about pruning. *Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*

I just got to tell you, if you're doing the right thing you can expect to be pruned. I hope that fits in with your theology. Because what God wants you to do is He wants you to be more fruitful. So when you're doing the right thing and you're serving the Lord and you're trusting in Him, He's going to prune you.

Here's how it happens. See if there's a branch that's particularly healthy coming out of that vine, then it's going to produce a cluster of grapes, maybe two or maybe three. So the vine dresser or the gardener here sees wow, the energy that's coming from the vine needs to go through the branch into the fruit. But he's got all these tendrils going off in different places. If you're successful and you're productive in your life you know you've got all kinds of opportunities, right? Opportunities to do this and then an opportunity to do that. And now you've got all these

other things going on. God says you know sometimes we need to have a little pruning experience here. Sometimes we need to cut back on the good things. There's nothing wrong with those things many times, it's just that the energy required to do those things is robbing us from what God wants us to use to be fruitful. So He trims off some of those things and says no, I'm sorry, I'm not going to have you do that right now because right now I want you working on this. This is the fruitful part of your lives. Wow. Pruning.

The second thing I want to say about pruning is it's seasonal. The first thing is it comes to people who are doing the right thing. The second thing is that it's seasonal in the illustration of the vine. And there may be a season in your life where some pruning is necessary and that's just part of what it means to be healthy. It's to trim back some things.

The other thing I think about this when I think about pruning is that it's very individualized. So the gardener's coming through and He's saying, "You know this branch looks like he could do this. I'm going to extend this branch over here, trim it up, because I think some fruit can come over here." So God is working in each of our lives in ways that are very individualistic. That pruning is something that God uses in order to produce more fruit in our lives.

I want to look at another part of this passage just for a moment. The part down here says – *Apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me* (that is, if you are not remaining you're not getting your energy from the vine, here's what happens) *you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

Now some people look at that and say, "Well they must have gone to hell because fire and burned," so you think fire, burned, and hell. I don't think that's what He's talking about here. I don't think He's talking about hell. But He's talking about people who are believers. I think what He's trying to say to them is this: Look, you're either going to be a productive, fruitful branch with fruit or you're going to be worthless. You're not going to experience the blessing that you're going to experience. I don't think you have to take that further and say what's going to happen to them for eternal security or something. The point is He's saying there's an emptiness about your life. And what happens to empty branches? They just get gathered up and thrown into the fire.

So we make a choice in our lives. Are we going to be productive and fruitful and self-fulfilled or Christ-fulfilled in our lives? Are we going to experience that fruitfulness in our lives or are we not? What's the key element that allows us to experience fruitfulness? That key element is whether we abide or remain in the vine.

But that first statement there – *apart from me you can do nothing* – and I'm thinking well I can do a lot of things. I can fill my schedule with all kinds of stuff. I can do all kinds of activity. But He's reminding us here that you can do all kinds of things, yes, but they're not productive. They don't have the meaning, the significance. They're not the fruit that is real. It's like artificial fruit you put on your table for decoration that's not really real. So the kids come along and pull the grapes and they pop out, you know. This is not the real kind of fruit, it's fake fruit.

One time I was walking in Scottsdale, Arizona with a friend. Along the street I saw a tree like this one. This is an ornamental orange tree. I didn't even know there was such a thing. I'd never heard of an ornamental orange tree before. But I'm walking in downtown Scottsdale, Arizona. We get out of the car and there's these beautiful oranges there. So I picked one. There's just so many. It's not like you're going to rob the tree of anything. So I took one. And my friend laughed. He said, "Go ahead and open it up. You are not going to like this thing." I did open it up and it is just all dry and it's not even an orange inside! It was a fake orange. That's why they call it ornamental orange trees and that's why they put them on downtown Scottsdale, Arizona. They're pretty. But you can't eat the fruit. It's meaningless fruit. It's gross.

I look at my own life and I don't want to have that kind of fruit that's meaningless. I want to have the fruit that's productive, that comes from God Himself at work within me to do something. So I want to have my branch connected to the vine so I can be this fruitful something that is nourishing and real.

Let's go back to the verses. *Apart from me you can do nothing*, He says. *If you do not remain in me* and so on. But look at verse 7. *If you remain in me and my words remain in you*, He says, *ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you*.

Well I don't know what you're going to do with that. Some of you are feeling a little uncomfortable about those words right there. Does that mean like He's a genie and I can get whatever I want? I don't know what you're going to do to limit that. All I know is that what Jesus is saying there is there's a lot more available to you than you can imagine. I want to give you a lot. I want to give you power, I want to give you resources. I want you to know there's more to your life than you ever thought of. And the key of that is to remain into the vine.

Wow. This is big stuff. God is saying understand who you are, understand who I am, and understand your place in the world and amazing things can happen and you can be a part of those. Good things can happen.

I just want to point out one more observation from the passage in that when we remain in Him, it's not just about bearing fruit, it's about bearing *much* fruit. That God often wants to do these amazing things in our lives that I don't think we are aware of. The key is remaining in the vine, getting our nourishment from the vine.

So let's try to make this practical for a moment. I don't know where God has you in your life right now in regards to this particular passage, but maybe He has you in a period or in a season of pruning and you just need to sit with the Lord and say, "Okay Lord, here it is. I want to be fruitful for you. What is it that I need to cut out of my life in order to be fruitful for you?" Maybe you're in a place where you're saying, "You know what, I'm doing a lot of things and some of that is apart from me and is doing nothing and I need to tie myself more into the vine. I need more discipline in my walk with the Lord. I need to be drawing my resources for Him and I need to be understanding what He wants for me so that I can bear fruit. I encourage you to look at the passage and ask God to speak to you because the Holy Spirit will touch you in a very special way and put a finger on something in your heart that says, yes, this is what you need to do with these words that I'm sharing with you.

See God wants to do some amazing things, I'm convinced, in our lives that are much bigger than we can even ask or imagine. But our part is to be tied into the vine, to be faithful. Not worry about the fruitfulness. That's God's job. Our job is to be faithful. And there's some times when we're faithful because it's seasonal where we don't see any fruit. We're just doing the right thing, we know we need to do this, so we keep on doing what we need to do and we trust that God is going to bring the result in the midst of that.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and the power that it has to change us. Lord, give us a greater understanding of our own self-concept, our own self-worth, our own identity. Allow us to drop off some of those things that are getting in the way of our fruit bearing experience. Lord, thank you for the communion that we can experience with you, that closeness that we can enjoy. Thank you for being our strength and our source of energy. I just pray this week as people are feeling weary, tired, in pain, overwhelmed, that in the midst of that experience, Lord, you provide that energy that's necessary to carry on and be faithful. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.