

“HEARD IT THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE”

PASTOR SANDY ADAMS

JOHN 15:5

“**I am the vine, you are the branches.**” A few weeks ago I spoke at a Bible Conference for the CC in Napa Valley, California. Napa Valley is famous for its vineyards, and its award-winning wines. The grapes produced in Napa Valley rival those grown in the Bordeaux region of Southwestern France. While in Napa I met an elder in the church named Francisco. In fact, he gave the announcements that morning. But Francisco also runs a vineyard management company, and late that Saturday afternoon he took me on a tour of one of the vineyards. Francisco told me he left the banking industry in the Bay Area to pursue *his first love* - growing grapes.

And Francisco’s passionate explanation gave me a better grasp on today’s text. In John 15:5 Jesus says to His disciples, “**I am the vine, you are the branches.**” Jesus is the “**true vine.**” He’s the vine that has weaved His way through every generation, and across every continent. For all believers, in all eras, Jesus is the source of life and vitality. In Him alone we find *fulfillment* and *fruitfulness*.

This morning, we want to take a walk through the vineyard with Jesus and His disciples... In the hours before He was crucified Jesus took a night-time stroll. A full moon lit the path for He and His men. They traveled from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane... The dirt road snaked down Mount Zion, crossed the Kidron Valley, and climbed the Mount of Olives. The eastern slopes of Jerusalem were covered with olive groves, interspersed with vineyards. And as they passed the rows of tightly strung vines Jesus paused and painted a beautiful analogy...

Jesus knew this was His last night with His disciples before the true darkness fell. The Master’s mind was centered on the welfare of those He’d spent 3½ years cultivating and growing. He wanted to draw a picture that would recap the essentials of their relationship. That’s why their passing through the vineyard was no accident. *Jesus* took them straight to the *grapes*.

One of my favorite all-time tunes is “*I Heard it Through The Grapevine.*” First done by Smokey Robinson - then Gladys Knight - then Marvin Gaye - then Credence Clearwater Revival – what a history... But after this night, and the lessons learned - Peter and the boys could've written a tune with the same title. Jesus communicates truths that are dear to His heart - and the disciples *hear it through the grapevine*. Four “**Gs**” highlight Jesus' message in John 15 - the **Gardener**, the **Grapes**, the **Graft**, and the **Growth**. *Jesus is the vine, and we’re the branches...* This morning, we’re going to *hear it through the grapevine...*

First, notice the **GARDENER**. Verse 1, “**I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser.**” This would be a thrilling analogy if Jesus had just stopped right here... No other form of agriculture is as *taxing*, and *testy*, and *tedious*, and *tiresome*, and *time-consuming* as viticulture. You sacrifice to own and work a vineyard. My tour guide in Napa Valley told me there are other forms of agriculture far more profitable than viticulture, but grape-growing is a passion. People who plant and cultivate the vineyard do so because they love it - it’s more an art and a calling than it is a mere business... And for Jesus to refer to His Father in heaven as the “**vinedresser**” and to us as the branches... well, that speaks volumes of the Father’s love for you and me.

In the spring, the gardener trims the branches. While they're soft and pliable, He tightens them to the wire. In summer, he fights disease and drought, and keeps branches heavy with fruit from dragging the ground. The harvest comes in the autumn. And in the winter the plants are pruned back. They're readied for new fruit... There's always work to do...

You see, the vinedresser has a full-time job. It's year-round. He's never off. There's never a season of the year when the vineyard doesn't require His attention. He *prunes, ties, waters, shovels, sprays, picks, cleans, gathers*... There are plants that produce fruit in the wild, but not a grapevine. To bear fruit it needs the gardener's constant oversight - and the same is true spiritually. We demand the Father's continual care.

In addition, it takes five years to bring a new vine into full production. The gardener relies on the principle of *delayed gratification*. He trains and prunes his plants for years before he ever sees the first signs of fruit. The vineyard requires an enormous investment of time, and effort, and patience. And what a picture of our heavenly Father... Our **"Father is the vinedresser."** Never doubt His investment in you!

When you think of God in Heaven what mental image appears in your mind? Perhaps it's *Father time*. He's got a long grey beard and hour glass in His hand? Maybe it's a Supreme Court justice - an old man wearing a black robe, and holding a wooden gavel?

But how about this picture? Think of Francisco... A young guy - strong, rugged, determined, passionate... The type of man who could never be content sitting behind a desk all day... A man who loves to be outdoors and make stuff grow... A man who doesn't mind a challenge, and thrives on hard work... A man who enjoys laboring with his hands... A man who likes to go home with a little dirt under His fingernails... Imagine God, reaching out His sturdy arms from under His rolled-up sleeves and handling the plants tenderly and patiently. His face is smeared with dirt. He has a *smile on His face* as He wipes *sweat from His brow*. He's up at sunrise and works past dark. He does it year after year. He's committed to His vineyard.

This is our Heavenly Father. Jesus calls Him the Gardener, and you and I are His garden. The Father loves us and labors to make us the best we can be. He's *persistent, yet patient*. He has *high hopes, yet realistic expectations*. Even during periods where there's no apparent growth He stays diligent. He's in it for the long-haul and He won't let one bad season cause Him to quit...

And the gardener's goal is grapes! Which brings us to the second G we find in this passage. It's **GRAPES**. Jesus tells us in verse 2, **"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."** Notice a progression: **"no fruit," "fruit," "more fruit,"** and if you skip down to verse 8 you'll see **"much fruit."** The Father's priority in our lives is maximum yield. He wants you and I to be as fruitful as possible. Pardon the expression, but **God goes apes over grapes!**

The gardener could care less how the vines look. He's unimpressed with silky leaves and full foliage. In fact too much greenery is a detriment - it's a waste of sap. If there're no grapes the vinedresser will lop off the branch. He has but one priority and that's fruit! Often as Christians our expectations aren't in sync with the Father's goals. We stop short when we taste *forgiveness, and freedom, and a measure of fulfillment*. But for the Vinedresser these are only a means to an ends. God *forgives us* and *frees us* and *fulfills us* in order to make us *fruitful!* God is after juicy fruit! But what do we mean when we use this term **"fruit?"** I hate to say it, but I know Christians who act a little fruity at times. **Fruit and acting fruity aren't the same. I know people with hearts as hard as coconuts. And motives as wrinkled as prunes. And morals as fuzzy as peaches. And methods as slippery as a banana peel. And dispositions as sour as a lemon.**

Did you hear about the Boy Scout collecting cans and bottles to raise money for his troop? He knocked on one door and it was opened by a prim and proper little old lady. She was a member of the local church, and had a reputation for being proud, and self-righteous, and more than a little judgmental. The boy ask her if she had any beer bottles he could have. The woman was outraged, "Young man, do I look like the kind of person who would drink beer?" The Boy Scout thought a second and replied, "No ma'am, pardon me. Do you have any vinegar bottles?"

There're a lot of Christians with the sweetness of a lemon. Hey, *being a fruitcake* and *bearing fruit* are not the same. What is the Gardener looking for when He pulls back our leaves and inspects us for fruit clusters? In Scripture the term "fruit" is an idiom for a wide range of Christian virtues... Matthew 3:8 tells us to bear fruits worthy of *repentance*. True repentance is a fruit of our relationship with Jesus... In Romans 1:13 *a bold witness* brings forth fruit... Romans 6:22 labels *holiness and obedience* as fruits... Later in Romans, in 15:28, the *giving of our money to God* is considered a fruit. *Good works* are called fruit in Colossians 1:10. In Hebrews 13:15 we're commanded to "continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips." *Praise and worship* constitute spiritual fruit. Then there's Galatians 5 - *the fruits of the Spirit*. When the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives a cluster of virtues appear: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*.

As with natural fruit, spiritual fruit comes in a wide variety of types, shapes, sizes, flavors, and textures. Suffice it to say the term "fruit" refers to anything that's a byproduct of our relationship with Jesus. Fruits are the fallout - the residue of the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives. Fruits are the evidence of Jesus in us. And the Gardener invests so much time and effort in the vineyard for one major reason - *He wants fruit!*

So many of the Christian leaders I talk too are concerned with *results*... how *many of this* and *how much of that*.. but **results are not necessarily fruit**. Machines and assembly lines grind out results, but it takes something living and breathing to produce fruit.

Wayne Jacobsen was raised on a vineyard in the San Joaquin Valley of CA. In his book, "*The Vineyard*," he uses his experiences to reflect on John 15... "You don't grow grapes in the same way you build a bookcase. It's not a matter of following well-prescribed steps within a controlled environment: cut this, glue that, sand here. Growing a crop is a dynamic process. It demands adjustment to an ever-changing environment. There is no schedule to follow that will work successfully each year. You have to observe the vine and its needs in light of the current weather and circumstances that impact the vineyard..." Jacobsen is saying that formulas and programs don't produce fruit.

Fruit is the result of photosynthesis - the interaction between light and life. And spiritual fruit is what results when a broken, faith-filled heart interacts with a merciful, active, loving, forgiving Heavenly Father. Spiritual fruit is not the result of self-help formulas, and self-improvement techniques. It's God's work in us. *You and I* can't make fruit. *Only God* can produce a cluster of grapes. And only God can produce fruit in us.

Which brings us to our third "G" - a *grape* starts as a **GRAFT**. Romans 11 describes Christian conversion as a wild shoot being grafted onto a domesticated trunk. And before I came to Jesus... that's what I was... *wild and rebellious* - I was always *shooting off my mouth* - I was *a wild shoot*. But God in His amazing mercy picked me up when I was *drying and dying and shriveling* and grafted me into His Son - the true vine.

When a graft occurs several steps are taken... **First**, the gardener takes his knife and cuts a slit into the root stock of the vine. **Second**, he slices off the bottom of the dying branch. **Next**, he places the cut branch into the slit on the vine - *this forms the graft*. **Finally**, the graft is

wrapped with tape or sealed with an adhesive. In ancient times this was done with clay.

And what an illustration... *Notice, for a graft to occur both parties have to be wounded...* The vine gets cut to make room for the dying branch that was lopped off. On the cross Jesus was cut. He was slit for you. With your mind's eye look at His head, His side, His back, His hands, His feet... watch the sap ooze from the Vine. Jesus was wounded to make room for you! And you too had to be wounded! Life with Jesus begins when we see ourselves crucified with Christ. We take on His identity. Our roots to the old life have to be lopped off. You have to renounce the past - make a clean break - and commit to a new life in the Vine. And here's the miracle of spiritual life... Once the branch is nestled into the Vine, and the graft takes - all it has to do is abide - and it bears fruit!

Embrace Jesus and it becomes springtime in your heart all year long. The spiritual sap – the life, and sweetness, and vitality, and joy, and power of the Holy Spirit rises up in you and pushes out fresh fruit. Once you find your place in the vine your only job is to abide. As Jesus tells us in verse 3, *"You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me."* *Nestle... don't wrestle.* The idea is to trust, rest, rely - not push and press.

In the vineyard, vines are cleaned during the winter. In the summer, and throughout the harvest, the vines get dusty, dirty, damaged. But in the winter months, the rains come and clean off the leafy branches. During the wintertime the branches get pruned and tied to the wire. They're suspended from runners that'll keep them from dragging the ground under the weight of the clusters. In winter, the vineyard gets tidied up.

When Jesus made His trek through the vineyard it was early spring. The winter had just passed. The vineyard they were viewing was clean, neat, orderly. Jesus is saying to His disciples that through His Word - *His promise of salvation* - they too are clean. As His followers they'll be tidied up and cleaned off. All that's needed for them to bear fruit is about to be accomplished. All they need to do is to trust in Him.

And likewise, in Christ, you and I are clean. We're right where the Father wants us. Sure we've got problems and we make mistakes – and we don't deserve God's blessing - but if we're in Christ we've been grafted into the vine - we're pinned to the wire. We're where the Heavenly Father can work with us - and on us - and in us - so *stay put*. *Once you belong to Jesus you have only one goal - and that's to abide.* Jesus says to us, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me."*

Unlike a tree, a vine has no clear line of demarcation between the stock and its branches. You can look at an oak tree and differentiate between the trunk and its limbs - but not so with a vine and its branches. On my trip to Napa, Francisco gave me a branch that had just been grafted into the root stock. I brought it with me this morning. Up-close you can see the slender line that separates the vine from the branch. But from a distance you can't tell where the root ends and the limb begins. This is what it means to *abide*. It's to identify completely with Jesus. It's to lump all I am into all He is - put all my eggs in His basket. To abide is to see myself one with Jesus, and have everything in my life grow out of who I am in Christ!

Listen to Jacobsen, *"In looking at a grapevine there is nothing about the branch that distinguishes it from the trunk... Thus, when Jesus*

called Himself the vine and us the branches, He could have chosen no better illustration of the intimate bond He seeks with His followers. He desires that we identify so completely with Him that others cannot tell *where He leaves off and where we begin.*" The vine, its branches, its fruit are one fiber filled and overflowing with the same life. And Jesus has formed the same relationship with us. *His Spirit now lives in us - and we now live in Him.*

This is what it means to "*abide*" – it's to trust in *the Gardener's graft.* I stop relying on *what I can do* and I start trusting in *what God has done.* The branch always looks to the Vine. *As it grows outward it leans inward.* It remembers that its fruit comes from the Vine. If a branch could talk it would cry for sap. It wants *sap* from the *tap* - all the *sap* it can *sip.* It realizes the fruit it produces is drawn from the life of the Vine. A branch keeps *looking to the Vine - relying on the Vine - resting in the Vine - drinking from the Vine.* This is what it means to "*abide*" - it's to orientate my whole life in a Christ-ward direction - to live life *toward Jesus!*

For it is possible to live the opposite kind of life... Here's a word of warning... If the branch doesn't lean toward the vine, when the hot days of summer comes the buds will get so heavy they'll drag the ground. And if dirt covers the buds they sprout *roots* instead of *fruit.* They take root in the dirt and get so fastened to the ground that to pull them up can destroy the branch. This can happen to a Christian... When we don't lean in toward Christ we take root in the dirt. The world grabs us, and stunts our growth. It's hard to break free. This is why our responsibility is to lean in - "*abide.*" Rest in the relationship Jesus has created with you.

It's interesting, verse 5 reminds us that our role in the fruit-making process is *surprisingly* minimal... Jesus instructs us, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in Him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.*" *Did you hear that? "You can do nothing!"* Our one and only role in bearing fruit is to lean on the graft - rest in the Vine - *put no confidence in our own efforts.* *Christianity is die-to-yourself – not do-it-yourself.*

Yet it's our failure to grasp the truth of our own *nothingness* that causes Christians to waste so much time and energy - *faking fruit* instead of *making fruit.* We know we're Christians - we ought to be happy - but the drought comes. We wake up one morning in a funk! We get the blahs, and rather than lean in toward the Vine - and trust the fact we're graft to Jesus... we try to manufacture our own joy. We plaster on a phony smile, and try to conjure up the desired emotions. We bounce into church with Hallelujah on our lips, but we're having a heck-uva tough time in our hearts.

Or we know we should be bold, and not fearful. We want to be bold - we try to shake the fear factor - we muster up a forced boldness - *but our heart betrays us.* It reminds me of a young lady who went door-to-door witnessing with a group from her church. She was reminded beforehand of the power of prayer and told to pray before she went out. When she returned she was excited, "*Wow, prayer is powerful! I prayed no one would be home and God answered my prayers.*" Too often we're *fruit-faking* instead of *fruit-making...*

And everybody is surprised to realize our utter weakness, except Jesus. *He told us, "without Me you can do nothing."* *When will we get it? The Christian life is not a difficult life – it's an impossible life.* You can't do it on your own! *God has to put it in you, and live it through you.* If it's not there, why fake it? Just admit it, then go back to the graft, and rely on Jesus do in you what you can't do. It really is a life of faith we're called to live. Paul said in Galatians 2:20, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*" Paul was grafted into Jesus, and learned to lean

on Him.

There is but one requirement for the branches, and that's "abide." Jesus says, "Abide in Me, and I in you." Think of it this way... Jesus *is the hand, and you're the glove*. On your own you're limp and weak, but wrap yourself around Jesus. He'll live His life through you! Twenty-five years ago I learned a poem I still quote. When life gets heavy and I start to buckle... "Take not a single care thyself – one is too much for thee. The work is mine and mine alone – thy work to rest in Me."

Which brings us to our final "G"... GROWTH. Where our Gardener God makes fruit He wants to make "more fruit" - even "much fruit." He seeks a maximum yield. In verses 7-8 Jesus says "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

Realize a grape vine is only good for bearing fruit. Unlike the wood of an oak tree you can't build a house out of vine wood - it's too twisted, knotty, weak. A vine branch can't even hold up a grape cluster on its own. To support its weight the branch has to be tied to a wire. You can build out of *pine*, but not out of *vine*.

It's interesting that Jewish Rabbinical law prohibited a sacrifice from being burned on top of a vine branch. The branch was worthless for *building or burning*. The vine's only useful purpose was for producing and bearing grapes. This is how our Gardener God looks at us. We're too twisted and weak for building. God builds His Church on the rock - on Jesus - *not us*. Our only purpose is to bear fruit that glorifies Him. This is important... we need to remember the Gardener's goal. Let me repeat it – it's not our *comfort*, or our *convenience*, or our *contentment*. It's "fruit!" And this is why He doesn't hesitate to "prune."

Remember verse 2, Jesus said, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away..." Understand, if your life is fruitless - if there's zero evidence of Jesus in your life - if there's nothing green at all - *no buds, only Bud after Bud after Bud* - then you're in serious trouble. In verse 6 Jesus adds, "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered, and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned." One day everybody will believe in Hell. That's where they'll throw the fruitless folks who somehow manage to never get connected to Jesus.

But if you bear fruit - even the slightest hint of growth in you - there's hope! Verse 2 adds, "and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit." If Jesus sees fruit in your life He prunes us so we can bear "more fruit..." He then prunes us again, and again, and again so that we can bear "much fruit..."

I'll never forget my trip to Napa. When Francisco pulled out his pruning shears they were big, and sharp. Trust me, they were able to do major damage to a vine. This is always the case when the vinedresser prunes back a vine. It looks as if he's trying to kill the plant. He takes his pruning knife and starts whacking off foliage. A veteran of the vineyard once referred to the process of pruning as "organized destruction."

In a typical vineyard each vine will sprout 40 to 60 different branches. Each branch holds 20 to 25 buds. In each bud there're one or two secondary clusters that will grow if the first cluster fails to sprout. *Which is why the branches have to be pruned...* If all the clusters are allowed to sprout the vine can't produce enough sap to support them all. The clusters will either fall off the vine, or they'll never reach the sweetness

and softness that produce the finest wines. In most vineyards the vines are reduced - their cut back from 60 branches to just 5. *That's radical pruning!*

And you may think this is what God is doing to you! The Greek word translated "prune" in verse 2, is used 15 times in the NT, and in every other usage it's translated "destroy or demolish." Pruning looks severe, but it's absolutely necessary for maximum fruit. God knows that if you and I are to be as fruitful as possible we also need to be decisively pruned.

One author explains the process this way, "Pruning is when God cuts away worldly passions and distracting habits that siphon off our spiritual energy." God's pruning knife may cut an unnecessary activity from your calendar – or an unhealthy relationship from your circle of friends – or an unholy habit from your life. Pruning is when "God narrows the flow to increase the force." Christians are notorious for substituting *busyness* for *obedience*. We forget what *God calls us to do* and respond to what *people tell us to do*. We allow too much foliage to appear on the branch - and it draws away sap that should be going to fruit.

There's a name for the sprouts that shoot out of the stalk above the fruit, and siphon off sap from the grapes. There're called "*sucker shoots*." The life of the Vine gets wasted on the leaves instead of the fruit. And this remains a Satanic strategy. He suckers us. It's easy to discern good from bad, but often Satan uses *the good* to distract us from *the best*. We get spread too thin. *More activity* isn't always *more fruit*. We forget that it's better to do a few things *faithfully and fruitfully* than a lot of stuff that turns out to be nothing but leaves. God has to prune off the suckers.

We need to be pruned, *but pruning isn't pleasant!* The knife hurts. Try a pair shears around a part of your life? When God cuts off what we're holding on to we bleed... And we're prone to doubt God whenever we're pruned. We think, "*God, what are you doing?*"

I'll never forget the two bushes that grew outside the front door at our church's former location. One work day a man took his pruning knife and hacked those bushes to bits. When I saw what he'd done I was steamed. I thought he'd ruined those beautiful bushes. He assured me they were okay. He said, "*wait a few months and they'll be looking better than ever.*" And to my relief, he was exactly right. Pruning really works.

I've since learned an important principle... Listen carefully, "*All growth requires change - and all change requires loss - and all loss requires pain.*" Thus, if you and I want to grow spiritually, and bear more fruit, we have got to accept the pain that comes with the growth. In other words, when God lowers His pruning knife, *submit!* Stay put. Don't stop abiding in the vine just because it hurts. Don't fight the pruning. Here's a truth... *the sharper the knife means the better the life*. It's a mark of maturity to welcome the Lord's pruning.

Well, let's wrap it up... Here's the four "G"s: We have a *Gardener*... He wants *grapes*... Which is why He's *grafted* us into the Vine... and He prunes us in order to produce *growth*. Remember, *you heard it through the grapevine*... You can do nothing of yourself... abide in the Vine. If you want *fruit to grow outward*, then *learn to lean inward*...