

Text: John 15:8 Vine and Branches sermon series. **August 24, 2014.**

Grace is yours through Jesus, the true vine, in whom we bear much fruit. Amen.

Have you ever seen a cluster of grapes so large it would take two people to carry it? I usually see grapes in the store, in that little two pound plastic container and I think I can carry that on my own. In fact, you often get annoyed if the clusters are too big and you just want to eat a few grapes and then you are struggling to tear the little branches apart to just get what you want. There was a time when there was a cluster so big, it not only took two grown men to carry it, that cluster of grapes was so large, they tied it to a pole and carried that one cluster on a pole between them! How large must that cluster have been? 50 pounds? Can you imagine a 50 pound cluster of grapes? That would take way more than one little plastic container. This happened in the Bible, when God's people in the Old Testament were about to enter the Promised Land. They sent scouts ahead to check things out. They came back with this honkin' big cluster of grapes, so large, two men had to carry it!

Wouldn't it be sweet if you saw a cluster that large? Wouldn't it be more awesome if the spiritual fruits in our lives were so large, so enormous that they couldn't be counted or weighed? That's what God wants from us, that we bear much fruit. That's the power Jesus' love gives to us, to bear much fruit. We have a special privilege as Jesus' followers to bear much fruit. As branches connected to the vine, this is our purpose in life, to bear much fruit.

Just to say this up front, so we know exactly what we are talking about. The much fruit are the good works we do to God's glory. Got that? Much fruit, these are the good works we do to God's glory. Notice that huge why for good works, right up front. To God's glory. Not to our glory, but to God's glory. We don't do good works for ourselves, for our glory. We do good works for God, to God's glory. We don't really want people to say to us, "What a nice job you did!" We ultimately want people to say, "What a great God you have!" God's glory. That's the why for our good works. God's glory, that's why we bear much fruit.

But do we really do that, all the time? A Christian brother at church is hurting and it's easy for everyone to ignore that, because no one even knows how they are hurting. How many of your neighbors could you even name? How many do you really know? How many would you let help you out? Or would you be afraid if they helped you, you would have to return the favor? When our son was in the hospital, my neighbor stopped by, noticed we hadn't been around as much. I told him what was going on. He said, like many did, "Let me know if you need something." Dude, I'm a man, I don't need help. I can take care of myself, provide for my family. Come on, need something? But I could tell he really meant it. And I really needed my grass cut. I said, "It would really be nice if someone could cut the grass." I could tell I made him happy by letting him help. Next day the grass was cut. But it was hard for me to admit I needed help. My friends, if we think, for one second, that we can get heaven without help, even if we think all we need is a little help from God, we are sorely mistaken, woefully mistaken, spend an eternity in hell mistaken.

We don't bear fruit to earn God's love. We bear much fruit because we already have God's love. God didn't wait for us to ask for his help. God gave us his Son, Jesus. Jesus gave up his heaven to come to our earth. Jesus didn't help us live better. Jesus lived perfect in our place. Jesus cleansed us, rotten branches that we were, washed us in baptism, scoured us clean with his blood, dried us in the perfectly white terry cloth robe of his holiness and set us before God as holy, clean, pure, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. Before we can say anything else, before we can say anything at all about bearing fruit, doing good works, we first have to say this. We don't do good works so that God will love us. We do good works because God loves us. First comes God's love, then comes bearing much fruit. First comes God's love, then comes bearing much fruit.

That why in bearing much fruit is so crucial. On the surface, your life might not look that much different from someone who doesn't know Jesus, isn't connected to the vine. You both go to work. You both are faithful to your spouse. You both volunteer some in the community. You hang out with friends. But under the surface, at the root, at the heart, at the level of motivation, you as a Christian, are bearing fruit that glorifies God. When you go to work, your motivation is to glorify God by using the talents he has given you. That means you are going to work hard even when the boss isn't looking. You are faithful to your spouse because that spouse is a gift of God and a partner to help you walk the path of Jesus to heaven. You are faithful because marriage is God's sacred institution and your faithfulness is one more fruit your bear to God's glory. You volunteer to be Jesus' arms and feet and hands in our community. You hang out with friends to strengthen the connection with other Christian branches and let your light shine to connect new branches, more branches to the vine. Same on the surface, but very different at the heart.

Notice Jesus tells us who and who only can bear much fruit. My disciples. My disciples. When I see the branches piled alongside the street after a storm, I don't expect to find fruit on those branches. I only expect to find fruit on braches still connected to the tree, to the vine. God only looks for fruit from branches still connected to the vine, still connected to Jesus. Jesus calls those connected to him disciples.

Now, let's clear up what might be a misunderstanding about the word disciples. I've asked groups of adults and children, "What does the word disciple mean?" And they answer, "A leader." I can see that. We think of the twelve disciples of Jesus and think of people who were leaders in the early Christian church. But look here. Disciples are all those connected to Jesus. Read the rest of the Bible and disciple refers to any follower of Jesus, not just twelve guys. In fact, the word disciple comes from the word to learn. A disciple is a learner, a follower.

You see, I think we can hear this stuff about bearing much fruit and being disciples and think, "That's for the leaders. That's for the super Christians. That's for twelve people here at church. And I'm not one of the twelve, because I'm not a leader, I'm not a disciple. Besides, I would just screw it up anyway. I'll leave it to the experts." On the contrary. Every Christian is a disciple. Every Christian is a branch connected to the vine. Every Christian has the privilege to bear much fruit, to do good works, to prove to the world that it's wonderful and special to be a disciple because we get to bear fruit for Jesus.

Don't worry about screwing it up. Jesus' disciples were often clueless. Jesus' followers were far from perfect. They followed him because they knew how screwed up they were. Finally, it was Jesus who gave them the power to bear fruit. It was Jesus' love that gave them the motivation to bear fruit. And it was Jesus himself who made it clear why he planted faith in their hearts, why he connected these branches to the vine: to bear much fruit. Why does someone plant a vine? To get fruit! No one plants a grape vine and says, "You have to come check out this awesome vine. Come over and eat some of the leaves." No! You get excited about the fruit. You plant the vine so that it bears much fruit.

Jesus gave you faith so that you bear much fruit. Jesus wants you to keep on bearing much fruit. Bearing fruit for 14 years and then being a dead branch isn't what Jesus wants. Jesus wants you to keep on bearing much fruit. And the only way we can do that is to have a strong connection to the vine, right? Jesus' words are how he strengthens that connection. Jesus' Word is the sap that flows through the vine to give the branches strength. Jesus' Word is the life, the juice, the power to bear much fruit. Jesus' Word. Jesus' Word. Jesus' Word.

That's what Vine and Branches is all about, helping you strengthen your connection to Jesus' Word so that Word strengthens your connection with other branches, so that together, the branches can bear much fruit. The list of the fruit you can bear in your Vine and Branches group is endless. It can be church stuff like cleaning and serving treats. What about connecting with someone who hasn't been at church in a while? What about visiting people who are new to our community and helping them get connected to the vine? That's valuable fruit that gives glory to God. It can be home stuff. Sitting down with your family and reading a daily devotion will certainly strengthen your connection to the Vine. Doing laundry and dishes and changing diapers might not seem like glorious fruit, but God sees. God is pleased with that fruit. It can be community stuff. Volunteering at the food pantry. Helping with the community garden. Doing garbage pickup along the highway. Talk with your Vine and Branches group about what you like to do. A part of Vine and Branches will be serving alongside fellow branches to bear much fruit at church, at home, in our community. The fruit you are excited to produce will be the best fruit of all. The fruit that is the most fun to produce will be the fruit that you produce most abundantly. Now imagine, two people, three people, twelve people working together to bear much fruit. Two men to carry that fruit? That won't be enough. We'll need two hundred people to carry all the fruit. Amen.