

YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION AS A BRANCH (John 15:1-11)

As I began studying today's passage, I had two memories. The first memory was rather faint. It involved a song that I remember having sung in college. I couldn't remember the name of the song or the tune or hardly any of the lyrics. That is where the internet comes into play. I googled what little I could remember, and I found the song.

The song is sung to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The title is "Bananas for the Lord." I've also heard it called "the fruit song." Here are the lyrics:

He's a peach of Savior
He's the apple of my eye
He prunes back my branches
When the branches get too high
He bears fruit in season
And His love's forevermore
That's why I'm bananas for the Lord!

Glory, glory, we're the branches
Glory, glory, we're the branches
Glory, glory, we're the branches
And that's why I'm bananas for the Lord!

Some songs have a short shelf-life, and I fear this is one of them, but I think this song needs to be revived. Today's text—John 15—serves as the inspiration for this song.

We are familiar with some of the metaphors Jesus gave as to who we are as His followers. We know Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. We know He said we are the Light of the world. We get that. We have a fairly, good understanding of what that means. Jesus also said, "You are the branches." We are less familiar with what it means to be a branch. Hopefully, that will change with this message.

I had a second memory. A year or two after singing the fruit song, I was sitting in a seminary classroom. As he was lecturing, the professor looked at us and said, "When you are called to serve a church, make sure they give you a job description." His reasoning was that at some point a critic is going to come to you and say, "Hey, you are not doing x, y, and z. As the pastor, you need to be doing x, y, and z. That is your responsibility."

Without a job description, you will think to yourself, "Well, x, y, and z does need to be done, and I'm the pastor; so, I guess I need to do x, y, and z."

Then, maybe another church member will come along and say, "Hey, you are not doing g, h, and i. You are the pastor. You need to do g, h, and i." So, you will add that to your plate. He warned that we would soon wear ourselves out trying to meet the expectations of the many church members.

The idea was that if a pastor has a job description, when a church member came along and said, "You are not doing x, y, and z," he could respond, "Thank you for bringing that to my attention. I agree that x, y, and z is important, and it needs to be done. The church, however, has asked me to do a, b, and c. I tell you what, let's elect a committee to do x, y,

and z. Since you obviously have a heart for this, I am going to suggest that you be the chairman.”

You may be thinking, “What in the world does this memory have to do with the first one about a silly song?” That’s a good question. Here’s how they relate. According to Jesus, you and I have a job to do. We are to be branches. You may have no idea as to what it means to be a branch. Good news! In today’s text, we find a job description of what it means to be a branch—what we are to do as a branch.

Look with me at John 15:1-11 as we consider, “Your Job Description as a Branch.” You have three responsibilities to fulfill in your effort to be a fully, functioning branch. As branches . . .

We Are to Draw from the Source That Gives Life

Vineyards were plentiful in the land of Israel. They were as common as wheatfields are in Oklahoma. Unlike in Napa Valley where the vineyards are large, corporate enterprises, the vineyards in Israel were small and family-run. Just as we have eagles adorning our currency, at one point in Israel’s history, grape clusters were found on their coins. More than that, in Jesus’ day, Herod’s Temple had a golden vine over the entrance. The image of the grape vine was like Israel’s Coat of Arms. It was their national symbol.

Jesus just moments before had held up a cup that held the fruit of the vine. He compared it to His blood that would seal a new covenant between God and His people. Now, He calls Himself the true vine.

The point is more than just that Jesus was using something that was commonly known to teach an important, spiritual truth. In the OT, Israel is portrayed as a vine which God had planted. Israel was God’s vineyard. Unfortunately, God’s vineyard did not yield good grapes. We read this in Isaiah 5. Jeremiah records God’s charge against His people, “Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine” (2:21).

Jesus comes along and says, “I am the true vine.” Israel was meant to be God’s vine, but they were found to be false, unfaithful. Jesus would be what the Israelites had not and could not be.

One preacher explained, “Though Israel bungled its mission to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, Jesus will get the job done” (Neal Patel).

Jesus has already done for us what we could never do on our own. Also, while working in us, Jesus will enable us to do what we could never accomplish by ourselves.

You may never have a vineyard, but you need to know, the fruit-bearing capacity of the branches is due entirely and completely to the vine. Likewise, the fruit-bearing ability of the Church is due to Christ alone. Just as the vine is that which gives life to the branches, Jesus is One and the only One from whom the Church derives its life. Apart from Him we have no life, and we can bear no fruit (v. 5).

I wonder. Are we ever guilty of looking to something or someone to cause our church to grow or to enable us as individuals to be who God created us to be? We might look for some new program, or the latest, best-selling book, or a brand, new strategy to turn things around. Some churches think, “We just need a new preacher!” And maybe you do. What I want to stress is that Jesus, the source of life, is the secret to fruit-bearing.

You might wonder, “What does that look like?” What kind of fruit do Christians bear?” If you are a Christian, then fruit is evidence that God is working in you, and that fruit blesses people other than yourself. And, since it is Jesus who enables you to grow that fruit, it glorifies Him rather than you.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists nine fruit that he calls the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus lives in you by means of His Holy Spirit. Over time, the Spirit grows within you qualities that you would not possess on your own. Those two verses in Galatians read: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control . . .”

These qualities are best seen when they are demonstrated in the presence of someone who does not possess those qualities. For instance, most people can be loving around loving people. You can easily be kind in the presence of kind people. But it is clearly evident that God is working in you when you are able to exercise patience toward impatient people or when you can be gentle with those who are rough and mean. Can you maintain peace when all hell is breaking out? Can you hold on to joy in the very midst of grievous, difficult circumstances?

You can’t do that on your own. You just can’t, and I can’t. But we can do that when we depend upon Jesus and draw upon His life-giving and fruit-inducing power.

That is our job as a branches. Also, as branches . . .

We Are to Receive the Care That Brings Health

Jesus was careful to point out that His Father is the Gardener. God is the Caretaker of the vineyard. God works to help us become fruitful. While it is essential that we draw from Jesus, the vine, the source of life, there are some other things that need to happen to make us as fruitful as possible. It is the Gardener who makes sure those things happen.

Those of you who have green thumbs, those of you who are skillful at gardening know that there is more to having a fruitful garden than just planting some seeds and hoping for the best. There are some things you can do and things you must do to increase the yield of your garden.

As a skillful Gardener, God the Father wants to provide us with care that will bring health and fruitfulness. Our job is to willingly receive that care. Let’s consider what God does.

Look at vv. 2-3. Back in 2017, the first year I was your pastor, I preached from this very passage. In that message, I identified two things that God does. First, God prunes from us that which distracts. Second, God cleanses us from that which infects. I failed to mention a third thing which is actually the first thing God does. He removes from us that which is dead.

When I use the word “us” here, I am referring to the body of Christ, the Church. There are always those within the Church who are not believers. They are make-believers. They are pretenders. These people are dead wood because they have not been made alive through faith in Jesus. Being dead, they are unable to bear true fruit. In time, from God’s perspective, they are taken away. From our perspective, they drift away. They come for a time, but eventually, they just disappear.

The Apostle John is the author of this gospel. He also wrote four letters that appear in the NT, the last of which we called Revelation. Listen to what he wrote in the letter we call 1 John. He wrote, "They went out from us, but they were not of us." Who is the "they" he mentions. They were false teachers. They were unsaved individuals who entered the fellowship of the Church for a time. He went on to write: "for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19).

I have a slim book in my library that is the 1957 edition of a book that was originally published in 1929. The author is Dr. Conner. He was a professor at Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth, where I went to school. He was long gone by the time I got there. The book is an exposition of 1 John. Listen to a portion of what he wrote about the verse I just read. Of those unsaved people who were part of the Church for a time, he claimed:

They were the fruitless branches that had not the life of the vine in them; there was no vital union between them and the vine. They were only camp followers; they never belonged to the army of the Lord.

John's rule is: "If they had been of us, they would have continued with us." He seems to think that one who deserts the army never really belonged to it; he did not have the spirit and life of it in his soul. When the deserter forsakes the cause, he is only manifesting what is in his heart.

. . . B.H. Carroll once said, "When you see a star fall, you can know it's not a star."

If a church is to be fruitful, the dead wood must be removed, and that is the Lord's job, not ours. Then, we who are true believers must allow God to prune us. In this process, He takes out of our lives those things that keep us from being more fruitful.

What is hindering you from bearing more fruit, from exhibiting clear evidence that Jesus is at work in you? Are there unholy habits that you have allowed to take root in your life? Are there some questionable or least unprofitable practices that are commanding your time, energy, and attention?

The Father is going to take His knife, or His shears, or His scissors, or maybe His scalpel and excise those things from your life so that you can grow in Christ-likeness. Don't run away. Don't try to push Him away.

God performed surgery on the first human He created. God put Adam to sleep and took a rib from his side. From that surgery, something or more precisely someone beautiful came from that surgery. Let God do surgery in your life. Something beautiful will emerge from your life that will be a blessing to all around you, and it will bring glory to God.

I want you to notice that there are four conditions mentioned in our text: no fruit, fruit, more fruit, and much fruit. God doesn't want His children to simply have fruit. That is better than no fruit because if you have no fruit you are not even a Christ follower. But our goal is not just to have fruit. More fruit is better, but God has a higher goal for you. He wants you to have much fruit. To that end, He will tend you and do what He need to do to increase your fruitfulness. The first thing He will do is prune you.

Now, we come to the second thing. The word in v. 2 that is translated as *prune* in my version is translated as *cleanse* in some others. Verse 3 tells us that making us clean is clearly part of what God does on our behalf.

I used to have a little book entitled, *Secrets of the Vine*. It was written by Bruce Wilkinson. It came out after his enormously popular best-seller, *The Prayer of Jabez*. In *Secrets of the Vine*, he lays out the truth that is found here in John 15. In preparation for the book, he interviewed a man who was the caretaker for a large vineyard. This man explained that the branches which lay close to the ground are often kept from being more fruitful because their leaves get coated with dust and mud. Wilkinson asked the man if he cut off those branches. He answered, “Oh no, they are far too valuable.” He said that what they do is they take a pale of soapy water and simply wash off those leaves, and that enables those branches to be more fruitful.

When we hang close to this world, which we most certainly do, we tend to become soiled and dirty, and our fruitfulness is compromised. The Father sees, and He comes to us, just as Jesus went to His disciples early the very night He spoke these words. Jesus took a basin of water and washed the feet of His disciples. The Father takes His word and washes us. Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:26 about “the washing of water with the word.”

Let God wash you often with the cleansing power of His word. He will make you clean and fruitful.

As branches we have a third part to our job description.

We Are to Maintain the Link That Is Vital

Look at the first word of v. 4. In my version it is the word *abide*. Some versions use the word *remain*. Some others render it as “Stay united with me,” “Be in me,” “Live in me,” and “Continue in me.” Regardless of the exact wording, the idea is that there needs to be a strong, continuing connection, an enduring linkage between us and Jesus.

The central message of this passage is that we are to abide in Jesus. Between verses 4 and 10, the word *abide* or *abides* is used ten times.

One preacher pointed out, “We can’t produce any fruit by just trying harder. We can’t simply ‘get our fruit on!’ If we want to bear fruit, we have only one option: Abide in Christ.”

How do we do that? Very simply, we depend on Him. We talk to Him. We consult Him. We pray. We continue in His word. We obey. We accept His love.

Can you imagine living in a house with someone and never talking to that person, never acknowledging the other person’s presence, never asking him, “Hey, how was your day?” Instead, just pretending that person wasn’t even there.

I am afraid that describes how some people treat God. God is there, but they don’t acknowledge Him, talk with Him, seek His input, and enjoy His presence.

We can do better, and we must do better if we are to bear much fruit. I encourage you to start the day by talking to God. End the day by talking to Him. And find moments throughout the day to practice His presence.

Let me stress this: We don’t produce the growth of fruit on our own; we permit the growth. We don’t cause the growth to occur, but we allow the growth by drawing from the Source, receiving the care, and maintaining the link. The growth will happen if we

don't get in God's way, if we don't stiff arm God.

Being a branch is God's way of changing us so that He can use us to change the world. I close with a story about one fruit used by one man to change another man. This story was told by Tom Antwerp who serves as the pastor of Grace Chapel in Wilmington, MA.

Julio Diaz is a thirty-one-year-old social worker from the Bronx. Every night he has a regular evening routine. He ends his hour-long commute back from the city to his apartment one stop early so he can get off and go to a diner. This diner's become his home dinner spot. One night Diaz stepped off the Number 6 train onto a nearly empty platform, and his evening took an unexpected turn. As he walked towards the stairs, a teenaged boy approached him and pulled out a knife. Julio gives the boy his wallet and says, "Here you go." As the boy leaves, Julio calls out, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm." He continues, "All I wanted to do was go get dinner, and if you really want to join me, hey, you're more than welcome." The stunned boy accepts Julio's offer, so they go to the diner Julio frequents. Once seated, the manager, servers, and other staff come by to say hi to Julio, and the boy is again surprised. He says, "Man, you know everybody here. You're even nice to the dishwasher . . . I didn't think people actually behaved that way." Julio asks the boy, "What is it that you want out of life?" The boy sits there not knowing what to say.

When the bill comes, Julio says, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill, because you got my money . . . So, if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you." The boy hands the wallet back. Julio takes a twenty out and gives it to the boy, asking the boy for his knife in return, to which the boy complies. In Julio's words, "I figure if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world."

You know, when I hear Julio tell that story, I don't think he was being nice. I think he was tapping into the power of kindness, which is much stronger than nice. Kindness is that great jujitsu response to the harshness of the world. Jujitsu is the counterintuitive Japanese martial art that refuses to forcefully oppose the attack of the enemy, but uses the momentum of the attacker's energy against them. Literally, jujitsu is the art of softness. It's the kind of strength that chooses to believe something can be gained when we respond to the harsh world not with greater harshness but with counterintuitive generosity.

God wants to use you to change this world. He starts by changing you. As He does, He enables you to bear more and more fruit. As people partake of that fruit, they want what you and I have. Be a fruitful branch to the glory of God and the good of this world!