

The Vine and Its Branches

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot's sermon emphasizes the necessity of bearing spiritual fruit as a true branch of Christ, highlighting the roles of pruning and self-examination in the believer's life.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, John 15:1, Romans 8:28, Galatians 5:22, Hebrews 12:6

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Fruitfulness In Christ"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches on the analogy of the vine and branches, emphasizing the importance of bearing fruit in the Christian life. He delves into the significance of being pruned by God to bring forth more fruit, highlighting the need for spiritual integrity, humility, faith, hope, and heavenly-mindedness. Philpot explains how God removes unfruitful branches from His vine and prunes those bearing fruit to increase their productivity, urging believers to undergo spiritual pruning for growth and maturity.

Transcript

A sermon preached on June 20, 1841, by J. C. Philpot, at Zoar Chapel, London

"I am the true Vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit." John 15:1,2.

What a solemn season the evening of that night was, when the Lord of life and glory was delivered into the hands of wicked men! when, before Judas came to betray him with a kiss, he opened as it were all his heart, and told out the secrets of his loving bosom into the ears of his disciples; when he said to them - "Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knows not what his lord does; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father, I have made known unto you."

He was at this solemn season setting before them everything that could comfort their drooping spirit. "Let not your heart," he says, "be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me." And if there ever was a special season, wherein the Lord, during his abode upon earth, administered spiritual consolation to those who were eternally his, we must fix this as the period, of all others, wherein that consolation was administered by him to their disconsolate souls.

But we see that the Lord did not merely administer consolation to them at this trying hour, when he was about to be taken from them and nailed to the cross, when he was going to leave them, and withdraw from them his bodily presence. He did not confine himself to topics of consolation; but he added topics of

solemn instruction, and topics of deep warning. Now this shows to us, that however solemn a season of Divine consolation a child of God may be favored with from the lips of the Most High, the Lord will take care to administer instruction, reproof, and warning with it. So that the ministry of the Gospel is not one pure unmixed ministration of consolation; but fully corresponds with the character that the Holy Spirit has given of the Scriptures - that they are "profitable for doctrine" that is, teaching, "for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." And this coincides with the character that the Apostle Paul gives of his own preaching, where he says - "Commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

It is, then, a thorough mistake of what the ministration of the Gospel is, to think that the only Gospel topics are those of consolation for God's people. That is a short-sighted, misdirected view of what the ministration of the Spirit is. We find that the Lord, at the very moment when he was pouring consolation into the hearts of his troubled followers, lays before them a fearful warning; "Every branch in me that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that bears fruit, he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit." And if the Lord of life and glory laid before his followers instruction and warning at this solemn season, it evidently proves that it is a part of the ministration of the Spirit to employ such topics, and so to "rightly divide the word of truth," to "take forth the precious from the vile," and to separate the clean from the unclean.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, he prunes it, that it may bring forth more fruit." Without making any formal divisions of the text, I will, with God's blessing, endeavor to travel through the topics which are there lodged for the instruction of God's people, so far as the Lord the Spirit has led me into any acquaintance with them, and so far as He shall give unto me "a door of utterance" to set forth their meaning before you.

"I am the true vine." It appears from other parts of Scripture, that there were in the land of Judea plants which wore the appearance of the vine, but were of a poisonous, deleterious nature. We have a striking instance of this in the second book of Kings 2Kings 4:39, where "one of the sons of the prophets went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine, and gathered wild gourds from it, and shred them into the pottage," which he did not appear to know were poisonous and injurious; but those who were better acquainted with the plant cried out, "There is death in the pot." Here, then, was a plant, which bore a great similarity to the true vine; so great a similarity as to deceive this son of the prophets. There is much, therefore, couched in the words, "I am the true vine," as opposed to false vines, poisonous and deleterious vines.

We have an allusion to this in the Book of Deuteronomy, where we read - "Their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gommorrah; their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter" De 32:32; no doubt alluding to this poisonous vine, which grew in the land of Judea. We find also the Lord, in Isaiah 5:2, remonstrating with his people that he had "planted a vineyard with the choicest vine," but when "he looked that it should bring forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes;" that is, instead of bringing forth clusters of the true fruit, it brought forth clusters of such fruit as I have been describing - "the vine of Sodom," and "grapes of gall." It had, as Jeremiah says Jer 2:21, "turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto him." There is much meaning, then, couched in the words, "I am the true vine," implying that, however near any false Christs may approach in appearance to the Christ of God, yet that he, and he only, is "the true vine," out of whom all the living branches grow, and is the only vine which the right hand of God himself has planted.

Now this "true vine" is said to have "branches." And there are two descriptions of branches, which are said to be in it. One kind is in it by profession; another set of branches is in it by reality. We must not for a moment suppose that those branches which the gardener "takes away" were living branches of the true vine, that they ever had an eternal union with Christ, that they were ever redeemed by the blood of Christ, or ever came forth out of Christ, as being in Christ before all worlds; but they were in him nominally - in him by profession. And the Lord seems to take this broad basis of their profession, adopts their own language, and speaks of them, not as they really were in his heart-searching presence, but as they professed to be; and thus frames his language, not according to the reality, but to the appearance of things. So that there are branches in Christ professedly, that have a mere nominal union with him; that claim to belong to him, and yet bear no fruit; and as bearing no fruit, the gardener "takes them away," removes them from their standing, plucks them out of that position in which they have placed themselves, and casts them away, that all men may see their shame.

But what are these "fruits" that some branches bear, and others bear not? Before we can describe the state of those branches that bear no fruit, we must have a little insight into what those fruits are, the deficiency of which causes the gardener to stretch forth his hand, and to take them away.

These "fruits," then, appear for the most part to be inward fruits; and we have a catalogue of some of them in the epistle to the Galatians Gal 5:22, where we read, that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace," and so on. It is the absence, then, chiefly of these inward fruits, that the gardener finds in these nominal branches; and the absence of these fruits causes him to take these branches away.

1. Now of these fruits, sincerity, uprightness, and integrity of heart before God is one inward fruit, that the Lord looks to find in the branches that profess to grow out of this spiritual vine. Where there is no principle of spiritual uprightness implanted in the soul, there we must say that the man is radically wrong. I am not speaking here of worldly uprightness, of natural integrity, of moral honesty, of carnal sincerity; but I am speaking of a principle of spiritual integrity, whereby the heart is made right before the Lord, whereby there is "some good thing" as the Scripture speaks "toward the Lord God of Israel." Now, where this principle of spiritual integrity is absent in the eyes of the heart-searching God, it demonstrates death in the branch.

But how is a man to know whether he possesses this "fruit" of spiritual integrity? If he possesses it, it will be manifested in his dealings with God, and it will be manifested in his dealings with man. He that has a principle of spiritual integrity and uprightness of heart before God, will come before him as a God that is not to be mocked, and will lay open his whole soul before him as a Jehovah that tries his thoughts and searches his heart, that knows every secret movement, and working of his soul before him, and the chambers of whose bosom he outstretched before his piercing eye. Then he that has spiritual integrity, will have those feelings which the Psalmist had in the 139th Psalm 139:23, when he said - "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

This spiritual integrity and uprightness before God is much connected with godly fear; and, therefore I believe, that a principle of spiritual uprightness lies at the root of all true religion, so that where that is deficient, life is deficient; when the soul is wrong there, it is wrong altogether.

And as it will be manifested in our approaches to God, so it will be also manifested in our communion with the family of God, and in our dealings with the world at large. There will be no taking a high room, when we feel that the lowest place is too good for us; there will be no endeavoring to elevate ourselves in the

eyes of God's people, when we feel our heart to be "a nest of unclean birds;" there will be no walking upon the stilts of another man's experience, nor standing upon some high doctrinal tower, in one whose heart is really made upright and sincere before God. He will stand before the children of God in his true colors, telling them simply what he feels himself to be, and hating not only hypocrisy, but the appearance of hypocrisy; finding, doubtless, the workings of it in his carnal mind, but still brought to the apostle's experience - "The evil that I would not, that I do."

2. Again - Humility, spiritual humility is a fruit that grows only in the heavenly garden, the garden of the Lord, the planting of his right hand; and where spiritual humility is deficient in a man, the absence of that fruit stamps him as but a nominal branch. Pride was man's ruin; and pride, cursed pride, has so interwoven its roots with the fibers of man's heart, that nothing but the tearing up, the pulling up of the tree altogether, will ever totally eradicate that cursed principle; but there is a great difference between the indwelling of pride, and the dominance of pride. Sin will always dwell in us; but sin will not reign and rule in a child of God - "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace."

Now, wherever there is the absence of spiritual humility, there is the absence of spiritual life. But what makes a man humble? It is not gathering the language of humility from the word of God, nor from the mouths of saints; but it springs from having humbling views of one's self, "from seeing light in God's light," from beholding the purity and perfection of him "with whom we have to do," from having a spiritual discovery of what sin is, and feeling the burden and weight of guilt laid upon our consciences, from being led by the Spirit into the chambers of imagery to see the tracing upon the wall, and so to "abhor ourselves in dust and ashes" before God.

3. The principle of living faith is another "fruit," an internal fruit, the absence of which stamps a man as a nominal branch. He that has no faith is evidently dead in sin; for the communication of life to his soul is contemporaneous at the same moment with the implantation of faith; and faith is raised up in the soul by some manifestation of God. For faith is the eye of the soul which sees God, the ear of the soul which hears the voice of God, and the hand of the soul which takes hold of those manifestations which are given to it by God himself. Therefore, if faith, Divine faith, living faith, spiritual and supernatural faith be lacking in a man, Divine fruit is lacking, and he is stamped by the absence of this fruit as a mere dead branch, one that is only nominally in the living vine.

But one shall say - "Are there not dear children of God who are full of unbelief, who are exercised with many doubts and fears, who cannot read their saving interest clear, and who cannot say--'My Lord, and my God?'" Doubtless, there are many living souls, who have no sweet testimony of their saving interest in the beloved, but still they have faith. Not faith in Jesus, so as to realize their saving interest in him; but they have faith in the perfections of God, they have faith in the spirituality of God's law, they have faith in the threatenings which God has pronounced against the ungodly, they have faith in the authority and certainty of God's word, and they have faith to believe that there is no Savior but Jesus, and that that Savior must be revealed with power to their souls. And, therefore, though they have not the joy of faith, nor the assurance of faith, nor the triumph of faith, yet still they have the existence and reality of faith, in acting upon things which are eternal realities, though not of such a nature as to bring peace and consolation to their hearts.

Faith deals with realities - it is "the evidence of things not seen;" and, therefore, dealing with realities, it will be according to the realities that it deals with. It is like a man looking through a glass; the things that he looks at will be tinted with the color of the glass. Everything will wear the aspect which is presented to his

eye through the medium whereby he looks at it. And to faith exercised upon the perfections, the tremendous attributes, the holiness, the justice, the majesty, the glory, the heart-searching presence of Jehovah - faith viewing God through that medium receives no consolation, nor any blessed testimony, nor deliverance of the soul from bondage. And yet it views eternal realities, apprehends eternal realities, and is spiritually affected by those realities which are brought home by the Spirit to the conscience.

4. Again - Hope is a "fruit" of the Spirit; and the absence of hope, the thorough, complete absence of hope, stamps death upon that nominal branch in which the absence of all hope is found. But some will say, "Are not the children of God often plunged into despair?" No, not into despair. They are often very near it, they are on the borders of it, they go to the very brink of it; the gusts from that pestiferous land may so blow their blasts upon them, that in their feelings they shall be in despair; yet no living soul ever sat his foot beyond the brink, no child of God ever stepped beyond the border, so as to get into the regions of despair. If he got there, he would no longer be in "the land of the living;" if ever he set his foot over the border that separates the land of hope from the land of despair, he would be no longer calling upon the Lord to save his soul from the lowest hell, but he would be at once overwhelmed by those torrents which would sweep him away into endless perdition.

Hell is the place of despair, and the conscience of the reprobate, before they are cast into those devouring flames; and, therefore, unless you know what the very feelings of the damned in hell are which you can never be certain you do, however you may do you think know them, or unless you have gone into the very feelings of despair in the conscience of the reprobate before hell opens its jaws to receive him forever, however near you have been to the borders of that dreadful land, you never can say your foot has crossed the threshold. No; there is a "who can tell?" - a secret support of "the everlasting arms;" there is a band, a tie wreathed round the soul by the God of all grace; there is a golden chain let down by God himself from the everlasting throne of mercy and truth, which keeps the soul from ever being drawn into that whirlpool, going down those tremendous cataracts, and being swallowed up in the boiling abyss below. There is an invisible arm that preserves the soul from being swept away by the water-floods; and this secret help is manifested by a lifting up of the heart oftentimes in prayer, and the relief sometimes experienced in pouring forth the soul in fervent cries, upholding all who feel it from being overwhelmed in the torrent of despair, when the sluices of God's wrath seem pulled up to hurry it into eternal misery. And therefore there is no child of God that has been quickened by the Spirit, but has some degree of hope which keeps him from making shipwreck altogether. So that we do not go too far in saying, that the absence of hope altogether stamps death upon a man.

5. Spirituality and heavenly-mindedness are "fruits" that the Lord finds - or rather, that the Lord works, and when he has worked, he finds, in living branches. That is, there is at times a drawing up, and a going forth of the soul unto him from whom all grace comes. The things of time and sense are not a living man's true element; and though he has a nature which is akin to them - aye, a base nature which, were it permitted, would wallow in the mire as the filthy swine does in the puddle - yet there is a new nature in him communicated by the Holy Spirit, which is at home only in heavenly things, and finds a congeniality only in spiritual things, when the Lord draws it into exercise, and brings the two together.

Then the utter absence of spirituality - the total lack of a nature that can receive, realize, taste, feel, and handle the things of God, demonstrates a man to be "dead in trespasses and sins." I know I am drawing a very narrow line here, because you will say and there is something in me saying it all the while "Think of those poor children of God that are in their first convictions; think of those who are passing under the rod of God's law; and do not forget those who are exercised with terrors and fears, and are cut up in their

souls with deep pangs of guilt." Oh! no, friends. I would not lay the weight of my little finger to harass them; no, not the weight of a hair of my head; but rather if the Lord is pleased, be used as an instrument to lift them up, and not to wound their tender consciences, nor bring one pang of distress into their afflicted minds.

But I appeal to you that are in trouble of mind--have you never anything which feels a communion and a sympathy with spiritual things? Is there no feeling in your soul, nor affection in your heart, that, could you only enjoy it, could you only have a blessed manifestation of it, would bring peace to you? Then, if the manifestation of God's mercy would bring peace to your soul, you must have a new nature to receive those manifestations, because they cannot bring peace except to a man who has a nature to understand them, a nature to embrace them and a nature to enjoy them. Therefore say not, however low you are sinking in misery, say not there is never at any time, on any occasion, at any moment, any one spark of this hidden life. Do not give the lie to your own feelings altogether - let not the devil blind you to everything that is passing in your heart; write not this "bitter thing" against yourself, that there never has been one single moment, since the Lord first quickened you into life - not one moment when there was a spiritual going up of your soul to the Lord of life and glory, nor any one panting of heart after his blessed presence, nor any "hungering and thirsting after righteousness," nor any one desire after the manifestation of his grace and glory.

If you say, "No, I have never experienced one longing after the manifestation of Christ; I have never poured forth one fervent prayer nor groaning cry that he would reveal himself to me; I have never known one single breathing of heart, nor panting desire to feel him precious to my soul," - say that, and I will say you are dead in sin, or wrapped up in the grave-clothes of a nominal profession; say that, and I will say, "Your conscience is seared as with a hot iron." No; I am convinced from soul feeling, that however deep a man may sink in conviction, yet there is at the bottom of it all, rising in the midst of that sea of trouble--a breathing, living, unquenchable principle, which cannot be satisfied without Christ, which goes forth in longing petitions after Christ, which hungers after his righteousness, and can only be satisfied with his favor. And the total absence of that stamps a man as dead in sin.

Now, then, here are the branches that "bear NO fruit." I dare say you have often observed a vine, that perhaps covered a large space of wall; and have you ever observed, that the more the vine spreads, the less it bears? The vines which bear the greatest quantity of fruit are those which are most cut in, and those which cover the least space. And thus these dead "branches" shall look very green, shall have a very large quantity of leaves, shall appear far superior to the fruit-bearing branches; but they are stamped with this mark--that they bear no fruit.

The figure will not hold altogether; no metaphor will hold in every part; it is a mistake to think that any type is complete in all points. The barren branches in a natural tree do come out of the stem; but it is not so with the barren branches in Christ's visible church. The figure does not hold there. They are merely in him by profession - tied on, as it were, by the string, or fastened by the wire of profession, without having an inward being.

Now, these branches that bear no fruit "the gardener takes away;" that is, he removes them from the place which they were occupying. And how does he remove them? Why, some he removes by the sudden stroke of death; when the time of vengeance is come, when they have "filled up the measure of their iniquities," the Lord removes them by cutting them down at a stroke. And this has often been the case with persecutors and oppressors of God's truth. Some have put an end to their own lives by the halter, the

razor, or the pond; others have been cut down by raging fevers; others have ended their days in a madhouse; and others have been so manifestly pointed out by the arrows of God sticking in them as the enemies of his truth, that their death has even been horrible to those who have no religion to know what the deathbed of a saint is. Thus the Lord "takes them away," by some putting forth of the hand of his vengeance against them.

With others the Lord deals in a different way. As I was speaking last Lord's day, he "dries up the green tree;" the branch becomes withered. There never was any spiritual sap in it; but even natural zeal dries up, and all fervor is lost. Thus the branch becomes withered and dead, and it drops off; that is, it no longer keeps its nominal place in the vine, it no longer maintains even an outward profession, but it drops off as a rotten branch. You that have experience of being in churches, have you not seen this take place in yours? Cannot you at this moment call to mind such and such a member, who once flourished in zeal, with great gifts in prayer, and was forward on every occasion to speak his mind; and has he not dropped off? If you have watched him, he has dropped perhaps into Arminianism, into Socinianism, into Infidelity, or dropped into open sin, and either taken himself away from you, or you have been forced to separate him on account of his bad conduct. Well, then, the branch is "taken away."

And the gardener, the Father, takes others away by ceasing to restrain them from the lusts of their hearts by providential barriers, by giving them over to a reprobate mind, so that they commit all uncleanness with greediness; and then in a fit of passionate disgust they throw aside all religion. The deep backwater of sin in their heart bursts through the flood-gates, which hitherto have pent it back; and they rush headlong into the pleasures of the world and the lusts of the flesh. Satan finds the chambers of the palace "swept and garnished;" and "he takes seven devils, and enters in, and dwells there, and the last state of that man is worse than the first." And thus in way of judgment the Father "takes them away."

But some may go on even to a deathbed; aye, and be thought highly of in a church; yes, and be received as gracious men and women, and go on flattering themselves they are the children of God, building upon vain props, resting upon rotten confidences, and when they come to die, the Lord takes the veil off his angry countenance, and frowns them into a never-ending perdition.

Or, more than that; the Lord may "take them away" at the very moment that the soul leaves the body; that they may seem to die in peace, and the Lord reserves his "taking them away" until that moment, when the soul leaves its earthly tabernacle, and it is cast into the place where hope never comes.

These, then, are the branches, in the vine nominally, whom the gardener "takes away."

We come now to the branches, whom the Father "prunes, that they may bring forth more fruit." These living branches, then, that bear true fruit, are apt to become weak and sickly, and thus need the cleansing hand of the gardener. The word "purge" signifies to purify or cleanse. And there are various ways of cleansing or purifying the vine.

Sometimes the branch gets encrusted with moss, and what are called lichens. It gets run over with these adventitious foreign encumbrances, which seem, by preventing the sap having free course, and excluding the influence of the atmosphere, to make the branch sickly and diseased. How covetousness and worldliness and the cares of this life and anxiety after the poor perishing things of time and sense, how this moss creeps round a man's heart! and as it creeps round his heart, how it binds it and contracts it! The Apostle truly said, "The love of money is the root of all evil; which, while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

We might expect that when the Lord blessed a man with prosperity, it would open his heart; but do we see it so? No, almost always it contracts his heart. When this moss gets round him, it seems to bind the bark; and as it nips and contracts the bark, the sap seems to be stopped in its circulation, so as not to flow into it, to make it "fruitful in every good word and work." Now, the Lord sees that some of his people are getting this moss round them; they do not bear fruit; the branches are becoming sickly; they look withered and shrunken. The gardener watches this, for he wants to see how his vine is going on; "the beloved comes into his garden to eat his pleasant fruits." And he stretches forth his hand, and takes the moss away. There is no other remedy. It was binding the bark, and stopping the vital juice. He takes away, then, the property; removes the worldly prosperity; mars the man's prospects in life; and thus removes that which was prejudicial.

Sometimes, if we look at a branch, we shall see one part of it beginning to swell; a knot is forming there; and, as it swells, and a knot forms, that also stops the circulation of the sap, and makes the branch sickly and the fruit to wither. Now, here is pride in a man's heart, which makes it swell with ambition and presumption and self-exaltation and a desire to be something. And when this pride begins to rise and swell, it not only swells outwardly, but it swells inwardly; and as it swells inwardly, of course there is less passage for the sap to flow. Pride is not merely such as may be visible in a man's outward gesture and demeanor; it is inward, and when it is in a man's heart, it contracts it, and it seems to stop the circulation of living sap in his soul.

And what is the cure for that? Why, the knife must come to prune down this knot - to remove this swelling. Are you gifted in prayer? The knife must come, and cut your pretty gift. Have you a good memory of the Scriptures? You must find your recollection of texts and passages fail? Have you a good judgment of the doctrines of grace? You must come to the spot of Ephraim, and "be broken in judgment." Are you in any way secretly exalting yourself among the people of God? You must have the knife of piercing convictions passed through this pride of yours, so as to go right through it inwardly, as well as pare it and clip it outwardly, and cut you down to your right measure. And thus there is a purging of the branch, "that it may bring forth more fruit."

The branch sometimes gets too luxuriant; all its strength goes into leaves and shoots, and the juice is not so condensed as to produce fruit. Then the gardener must take out the pruning knife, and cut the ends of the branches off. Oh! to have the pruning knife, friends! to have our religion, or what we thought to be religion, pruned and cut down to a stump; to have all that we thought in ourselves was of God so cut in by the hand of this heavenly gardener, that its very existence seems gone, and what we prized lies at our feet, cut off from that branch on which we once looked with pleasure!

You that are exercised in your souls - you that have felt the hand of God in you and upon you, have you never had much pruned off and cut in, that you thought was true religion? Have you not often been resting upon notions and opinions, and by painful exercises found these pruned off and you cut in? Have you not often been resting upon some fleshly excitement, some carnal imagination, some airy vision, some good opinion of others concerning you, and found in solemn moments, when pangs of distress and guilt laid hold upon you, that these things were cut off, so that you could take no comfort from them; and you look at them, and see them bleeding away in the dust, and at last withered, so that you yourself say, "They are only fit for the ash-heap, to be thrown away with the loppings of the vine?" You know little of what it is to be a fruit-bearing branch, if you have not had the pruning knife often to cut you in. It is not merely one pruning season, and then all pruning done with forever. The vine, of all trees, needs pruning most; it never will bear fruit, until it is well cut in and thoroughly pruned. And so a living soul is continually pushing forth those

luxuriant shoots, that need to be cut off and pruned away by the hand of the heavenly gardener.

Now, what is God's object in these sharp exercises, these powerful temptations? these distressing convictions? It is to make the branches bring forth more fruit. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes it," not to destroy it, but "that it may bring forth more fruit." Then afflictions, and distress, and convictions, and solemn and deep exercises of soul before God, and the weight and burden of harassing temptations, in the hand of God cause the branch to bear more fruit. They, in the hand of the Spirit, cause greater humility; for if a man has a deeper sight and sense of self, he will be humbled, broken, laid low. The Spirit working by them will cause also in a man more integrity and uprightness of heart before God. Feeling how much of his religion has been "weighed in the balances, and found lacking," and how much has been cut off by the apparently ruthless, unmerciful knife of the Gardener, he becomes exercised as to the remainder. "Is knowledge nothing? is the opinion of others nothing? is church membership nothing? is my having seen Christ in this passage and Christ in that, nothing?" says he to himself - "why, I have proved it is nothing, to raise up my soul in hours of temptation, and to comfort me in bitter seasons of distress; what, then, is it all a delusion? is the whole of my religion wrong to the very bottom? is it radically deficient? is it nothing else but the joy of the hypocrite, that is for a moment?" These anxious inquiries produce sighs and cries and groans and fervent prayers and wrestlings that the Lord would not allow us to be hypocrites, but would make us sincere and honest before his heart-searching presence.

So again, the loss of all this fleshly religion by the pruning knife of God, produces fruit not only before God, but before man. For it works in this way; the man begins now to be more faithful to the members of the church, with whom he is connected - more honest to all with whom he has to do in spiritual matters. He says - "Oh! I have been so deceived; thought I was such a Christian, I deemed myself so far advanced in the divine life, but, oh! how differently I feel now. Oh! the sufferings I have experienced under a sense of guilt and wrath! Oh! how little I feel to have been spiritually taught of God!"

And then, being weighed up in his own feelings, he will begin to put other people into the same scale. "Did you ever feel so?" he begins to ask. "Were you ever exercised thus? has the Lord ever brought you down?" He now can no longer mask everything under a cloak of amiability and taking things for granted, but begins to search and try whether others are under the same solemn teaching. This cutting in, then, makes him not only honest before God, but faithful to his fellow-sinners and his fellow-members.

Again - the pruning knife is often made the means, in the hand of the Lord, of kindling in him a spirit of fervent pouring out of soul before God. My friends, I appeal to your consciences. Where are your prayers in seasons of prosperity? Where are the sighs and groans of your spirit, when all things are flourishing in temporals, and all things are smooth in spirituals? Let conscience speak. Are not your prayers cold, lifeless, short, and formal? But when do you groan and sigh and cry to the Lord? when do you seek blessed communion with him, and feel that nothing but his presence can satisfy, nothing but his blood can atone, and nothing but his dying love shed abroad in your heart can sweetly lift up your soul into "the peace of God that passes all understanding?" When? where? how?

Why, it is when you are under solemn exercises, deep soul trials, passing under the rod of God's covenant, walking through the fires of temptation, wading through the waters of trouble. Oh! it is not just dropping down upon one's knees, and complimenting the Lord with a few words, however fluently uttered; but it is what is passing in the chambers of the heart - it is the pouring out of the very soul before him. That is prayer, and the rest is all delusion. And thus these exercises are, in the hands of the Spirit, the means of kindling in us earnest intercession at a throne of grace, for the blessings that we spiritually need.

Again - they are made useful also, in the hand of the Spirit, to make us spiritual and heavenly minded. Where are you - let honest conscience speak - where are you, when business flourishes, when customers increase, when worldly things smile, and everything wears a pleasing aspect? Are you spiritual? are you heavenly-minded? are you crying to the Lord in some secret corner? No! you are turning over your books, calculating the interest of your money; your eyes are here and there, looking after some new fashion to attract customers to your shop, or, in some way or other - speculating with your imagination upon those things that shall feast your carnal appetite. Is it not so? Let 'honest conscience' speak in your bosom.

Now, when all things are against you, when the cutting winds of adversity blow upon your face, when everything seems to frown, and God adds his frown too, lowering, as it were, from behind temporal things, showing his reproofing face behind the rebuking aspect of temporal events, is there not a going upward of heart after something that shall not pass away? Is there not the stretching forth of your hand to lay hold of the substance, when shadows are fast vanishing? Is there not some breathing forth of your soul after spiritual things, when temporal things are all cut away from under your feet, and that vision of peace and happiness which you were forming in your carnal mind is all swept away, like the delusive appearance of water in the desert, and leaves not a trace behind? Then you become spiritual and heavenly-minded.

Again - the Lord working by these exercises - for they themselves cannot do it - often strengthens and draws faith into exercise. We read of "the trial of our faith, which is much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire." Then faith must be tried; if it be gold bought of the Lord, it must be "gold tried in the fire." Now, these exercises, temptations, distresses, the powerful cuttings-in by the hand of the heavenly Gardener - try the faith that the Lord gives; and faith being tried and put to its utmost strength, a man begins to find what faith really is.

What a wonderful grace is faith! The heavier the load put upon it, the stronger the back of faith is to bear it. No one knows the power of faith, until he is brought into circumstances of difficulty and trial, which press and bear down this living principle. But this living principle upheaves itself, like the "leaven hidden in three measures of meal;" "it lives," as Deer says, "under load; though damped, it never dies." And thus it is drawn out and called forth under powerful temptations, and becomes strengthened thereby, brought forth into all its activity and living vigor, and thus bears the stamp of being the supernatural, living "faith of God's elect."

The "purging," then, of these fruit-bearing branches makes them bear more fruit. Not indeed often in our feelings; but we are very poor judges of this matter. The branch is more loaded with fruit, the more it droops to the earth. It is the tree that bears no fruit - the barren poplar - that shoots aloft into the sky. The vine, loaded with fruit, cannot raise itself up into the clouds; it needs support. We are very imperfect judges what fruit is. Those who bear most, think they bear least; those who bear least, think they bear most. Where shall we find one that boasts so much of fruit as a self-righteous Pharisee - an Arminian wrapped up in the rags of his own righteousness? Why, he is always prating about fruit, and never bears one single particle of it to the glory of God. But the poor, burdened, exercised, tried soul, that is stooping as it were under the weight of the temptations he is exercised with - this drooping branch is loaded with fruit, and the more he is loaded, the more he will bend to the ground. But it is the eyes of others, and not his own - and they must be discerning eyes too - that can distinguish that these are "the fruits of the Spirit," to the glory of God, who "works in him to will and to do of his good pleasure."

Now, which are you? You that profess the doctrines of grace, which are you? There is your doom; not from my poor, weak, perishing lips, but from the word of the living God. Read your sentence - hear your

destiny. If you are a branch nominally in the living Vine, that bears no inward and outward fruit, there is your sentence recorded. The Gardener will "take you away," cast you upon the ash-heap, and from the ash-heap into the flames of endless perdition. But if you are a branch that is bearing fruit to his honor and praise and glory, he will "purge you, that you may bring forth more fruit;" and you shall shine in the realms of a never ending day.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/the-vine-and-its-branches/>

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