

## **The Vinedresser, Tim Keller**

I'm going to just read as we looked at this passage last week. We look at it again, and I'm going to read just verses 1-5. John 15:1-5.

<sup>1</sup>Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. While every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup>You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing."

This is God's word.

We began looking at this passage last week. It's about how to grow. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." He gives us the very best illustration that in that day you could give for the interpenetration of two natures. You see, when he says, "I'm the vine and you are the branches," he's actually saying that through Christ, the vine, whose roots are in the Godhead, through Christ, we can actually enter into the life of God. God's life interpenetrates our life. The result, as when the life of the stem interpenetrates the life of the branch, the result of us coming into the nature of God through Christ is supernaturally fueled character change. That's what growth is. Growth in grace, growth in Christ, supernaturally fueled character change. Today, we have other, actually, we have other illustrations than Jesus had to use at his time. There's another way to put it. Christianity says that you are not just made of earth, but you're made of heaven, too. Why is it that death feels so unnatural? Why do we just Why do we know that we're not built for death? Why do we know we're built for more than just time and space? Because the Bible says there's a streak of eternity in you and me. That streak of eternity, that soul, that spirit, means that... I'm using a modern illustration now to try to go along with what Jesus said here. It means that your hearts are conductive material. Our hearts are like plugs designed for impactive connection with God, to be interlocked with his nature so that his power and glory can just run through our circuits.

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You see, we have other illustrations that maybe they didn't have then. And yet, you see, the illustrations are all the same. What does it mean to be born again? It doesn't mean just to have an emotional experience. It means that you are grafted in, that there's a connection made so that you as a branch are brought into the vine, which has its roots in the Godhead, and through participation in the divine nature, that what the new birth is. There can be supernaturally fueled character change in your own life. You can grow, you can bear fruit. Now, last week we began looking at this and we looked at what the branch is supposed to do in order for there to be this great growth in your life. The branch, it says, Jesus says, "If you remain in me," and we talked about what that meant. But I think I hinted last week that there's more to the growth of the vine than what the branches are doing. Verse 1 and two tell us that there's another aspect. I am the vine, you are the branches, and my Father is the gardener. We're told in verse two that the gardener is doing two things.

**[00:04:01.900] - Speaker 1**

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. While every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will bear even more fruit. See, there's another side to the vine and the branches. Last week we looked at what the branches have to do. This week, we need to look at what the gardener does to get growth. We see the gardener basically has two things that he's doing. Number one, he's looking for the dead branches to get rid of them. Number two, he's pruning the live branches so that even the ones that are bearing fruit, he cuts them, cuts at them so that they'll bear more fruit. That's what we have to look at today. If we want to understand how that same change can happen in our lives. We all want to be able to really change permanently. What does the gardener do? Two things. First, the gardener is examining the branches to see whether or not their relationship with him is formal or vital. That's what I want you to be able to do as a result of listening to this particular teaching. You see, it says in verse 2, he's looking to see whether a branch is fruitless and to be cut off or a branch that's fruitful.

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He's looking for fruit like any good gardener, any good horticulturist, any good vine dresser is looking to make sure that the dead branches are pulled off. What is a dead branch? A branch that has a formal relationship, but not a vital one. The branch is stuck there. It's on there. It's got some relationship. It's a formal one. It's stuck on there. You see, it's hanging there. But somehow there's never been a real vital connection. There's no real inner penetration of the life of the stem with the branch. In the same way, God looks in your life, in my life, to see whether or not you actually... You're sitting in church here. All of you, if you're in a sense, you're on the vine. That means you're connected. You might say, "I am a Christian," or maybe you're here and you say, "Well, I don't know, but I know I'm a religious person or I'm trying my best." In other words, you say there's some connection between me and God. Well, the question that the gardener has today, is it a formal one or a vital one? Is it a mechanical one or an organic one?

**[00:06:23.790] - Speaker 1**

Are you a mechanically religious person or an organically born-again person? A person with a real vital inner penetration between you and God of natures? That's the question the gardener is concerned about. And that is something that you have got to obey the text by learning to think through. That's a distinction that you've got to be able to understand yourself. Look, somebody says, "All right, the gardener is looking for fruit." Well, what is this fruit that tells the difference between a mechanically, formally joined branch and an organically, vitally-joined branch to God? What is fruit? Well, the word fruit in the Bible is actually used of supernatural character change. There's a place in Romans where Paul says to the Romans, I would like to come and preach to you, and I would like to bear some fruit among you. What's he mean? What he means is, he says, "I want to see God's footprints in your life. I want to see your lives change permanently and internationally. I want to see something in your life that is so hard to account for that people will have to say, God has been here." See, in Galatians 5, Paul talks about the fruit of the spirit.

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The fruit of the spirit is character change, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, humility, self-control, integrity, courage, and so forth. Now, in this passage, Jesus actually mentions two of these fruit, two things that the gardener is looking for and that you can look for to tell the difference between a person who's mechanically religious and moral and a person who's vitally and organically actually joined to God through a real, lively, and vital faith. Those two signs are love and obedience. Look, in verse 9, now, we read this last week, and I didn't read it this week, but I'll make reference to it. Jesus says in verse 9, "As the Father loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love." Then in verse 10, he says, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remained in his love." Those are the two signs. Let's look at them. The first sign, remember we said the vine pulls out of the ground the life that the branch has not got access to, so the branch gets the life out of the ground, the nutrients, the sap, the juice, the moisture.

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In the same way, one of the things that Jesus Christ draws out of the Godhead is God's love. We're told here that the way you can tell a person who has really got a vital connection to God is that person is growing in my love, it says, remain in my love, dwell in my love. You're growing in God's love. Now, let's think about that for a second. That's a test. It's a terrible test. If somebody was asked, if you asked somebody, put it this way, if you asked somebody that knows you to come up with three or four adjectives that most characterize who you are. If you went to a friend and said, "Give me three or four adjectives that describe my most salient and distinguishing characteristics." Would one of those four be love? Would anybody say that about you? When people think about you, does that word spring to mind? In a world that is as selfish, as mean, as cruel, and as self-serving as the world we live in, it shouldn't be so hard to be a standout in this. Now, should it? Would anybody, does anybody, would anybody when they think of you, immediately think that you are unusually loving?

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It shouldn't be hard! The Bible says that it's one of the things that should be the fruit that's growing on your vine. But let me really try to show you the difference here. You see the Bible here, Jesus actually says, "You have to be growing in my love." Now, this means this. A Christian is somebody who's not just a more, growing as a pleasant person. When Jesus says, "You have to grow in my love," what he means is you have to be growing in loving God. The way you can tell a mechanically moral religious person from a vitally, organically growing person is this, are you growing in your love to God? Are you getting better and better at loving God? We're not talking about being benevolent, being charitable. We're not talking about being pleasant and nice and courteous. We're talking about this. Jesus says, "A real Christian is someone who grows in my love." Let me be real practical. Are you growing in your love for God? You say, "How do I know?" All right, let me be practical. How do you know you're growing in love for anybody? Do you find that you want more and more, you enjoy more and more spending time with him?

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Do you hear that? Can you say, I enjoy spending time with him, time in his presence, time talking to him, time listening to him, time reading his... I enjoy that more now than I ever did. That's how you can tell whether you're growing in love for your spouse. That's how you can tell whether you're growing in love for anybody. Do you enjoy spending more time with him? Or another thing, do you find it getting easier and easier for you to praise him? If you're growing in love for somebody, it gets easier and easier for you to revel and recount and exalt in their beauty and glories. You know what's good about them. You can talk about them. You tell them about it. When you praise him, when you spend time gloring in his glory and reflecting on his beauties, when that happens, do you find that that's changing you? It's making you a more satisfied person, a more calm person, a person who is more able to face life. Do you feel more treasured and protected as time goes on as you would if you know that you're the children of a holy and all powerful Father who loves you?

### **[00:12:37.710] - Speaker 1**

See, this is the watershed. This is practical. Growing in love does not mean you become a nicer person, though, of course, a person who's growing in this does become a nicer person. But where the rubber meets the road is, are you growing in your loving of God? Are you growing in your loving of God? Is that happening to you? Do you sense that happening to you? Do you feel it happening to you? Do you see it happening to you? Is your relationship there? You see, a moral religious person just does nice things, does good things, is busy, goes and does a lot of Christian activities. But a person who really knows personally, has that vital connection, has a personal relationship. That personal relationship, that love relationship, and that communication is growing. This is one of the reasons why a real Christian has to grow, because you see, love is so sweet. You see, have you ever sat down to a dessert and you say, I'll just take one or two bites? These really nice restaurants, you say, "Well, I'll tell you what, one or two bites." You take one or two bites, and next thing you know, it's gone. The whole dessert's gone! Where did it go? You sense that it's in your body. You jog your mind over the last two or three seconds and you realize, I ate the whole thing. What happened? What happens is that when something is sweet enough, it electrifies your mouth and electrifies your brain. And next thing you know, you're stuffing it in like a mad person. I think we all know that for the human heart, love is like that. When you run into a new love, it's addicting, it's sweet, it electrifies your mouth. You want to get as much in as you possibly can. When somebody comes up and says, "You're great. Your work is so wonderful." And you know what the socially acceptable thing is to do, and that is to try to be indifferent and kind, but you want so much more. You just want to stuff it on in. It stands to reason that anybody who's actually ever experienced the love of God is just doing everything he or she can possibly do to just stuff more in. You want to spend more time with them. You enjoy praise more. You find that growing. Is that happening to you?

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The second mark that the gardener is looking for, the second fruit is obedience. Now, what I mean by obedience, if you look carefully at verse 10, Jesus says in verse 9, "You have to remain in my love." Love is one of the fruit that will grow in the vine. But then secondly, he says, "And if you love me, you'll obey me." You see, you might be fooling yourself about love. Some of you might be sitting here and saying,

“Well, I think I love God.” But Jesus says, But there's an acid test. There's another fruit that goes along with the love, and that is, obedience. Do you obey my commands? Christian obedience is different than all other kinds of obedience, as we see here, because it grows out of love. When you love somebody, what do you say to them? “Your wish is my command.” Where did that language come from? Somebody just was very good at articulating what every person feels when you're in love with somebody. “Your wish is my command! Your desires are my orders!” Somebody says, you're in love with somebody, say, “I'd like to have this.” You say, “I got it. You got it. I'm getting it.” You see?

The attitude of a heart that's in love is never, “What do you want now?” Christian obedience, therefore, is vitally different than the obedience that arrives out of a person who is just mechanically moral and religious. Don't you see that? See, on the one hand, think about this. On the one hand, a Christian's attitude toward the commands of God is one of tremendous honor. Look at Psalm 1. Here's Psalm 1. It says, *The godly man is like a tree planted by the waters, and he grows and he bears his fruit in season.* It says, see, there's a growing person. But it says, *His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on it he meditates day and night.* Now, think about this. He looks at this and he looks at the law of God. How? He's scouring the law, it says. He's scouring it day or night. How is he scouring it? Is he scouring it the way a lawyer scours it when the client comes and says, “Here's my contract, get me out of it. Here's my lease, get me out of it.” So, the lawyer scours and it looks for what?

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A loophole. But the Godly man scours the law of God. Why? He delights in it and on it, he meditates day and night. He's looking for not loopholes. He's looking for new applications. He's looking for new ways to do it. Why? When you're in love with somebody and you go out shopping for them, and suddenly one day, you suddenly find the perfect gift and you say, “Oh, my, it's perfect. It's exactly what he wants. Exactly. I love him so much and I'm so thrilled.” Why do you feel the joy you feel? “Finally, with this, I'm going to be able to get my love in a way that will actually impact his heart. I'm so thrilled. I haven't been able to find something that I know is just what he wants. Now through this, I will be giving him my heart in a way that I couldn't before I found it.” You know? You rejoice because you said, “He'll love it. It's perfect!” How does a Christian read the law of God? It's a treasure chest of gifts for your king. When God gives you the law of God, how do you look at that thing?

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If you're in somebody who's religious and moral, if you're somebody who sits down and says, “Well, I know that if I'm ever going to get to heaven, if I'm going to get God's blessing in my life, my parents taught me, I need to read this thing. I need to obey it. I know society will go better if the Ten Commandments are obeyed, and I guess I really ought to try, at least for my best. But boy, I tell you, sometimes it's rough. It's a drag. I always feel guilty, but I know I've got to do it.” Is that how you approach the law of God? Or do you come and say, and here's the difference. A Christian is somebody who knows that you're not saved through your good deeds. You're not saved by being a nice and moral person. A Christian is somebody who knows that Jesus Christ is your substitute. He's your mediator. He's your savior. He came to Earth to

live and die in your place. We sang about it right before the sermon. Did you hear that? Thy love has met thy laws demands. Jesus Christ has come and done everything. A Christian is somebody who says, "Up to now, I've been trying to and be a good person, but now I see Jesus has done everything for me. I stop being my own savior. I rest and rely completely on what he's done, and I see what he's done. He's done it all for me. Now I can be accepted by my Father because of what Jesus has done." Now, when that has really come home to your heart, that understanding, and you're giving yourself that understanding is what connects the branch to the vine. When that happens, how do you look at the law of God, you say, "This is what he wants. This is the that he treasures. This is what will really please him. It's perfect. He'll love it. It's a treasure chest, a gift chest of things I will be able to give my father and my master and my king my heart by giving him this. What joy to know that this is going to rejoice his heart." You read the scripture and you obey the scripture the way a person comes home who's in love with somebody with a gift that you know is going to be the best gift that he ever got. Don't you see how completely different the Christian approach to obedience is? "If you love me, you will obey my commands, just as I love my Father and I obey his commands."

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"Your wish is my command. It's perfect!" Are you growing like that? John Newton wrote in one of his hymns, "To see by love thy law fulfilled and hear thy pardoning voice has turned this slave into your child and duty into choice." That's the language of the heart that is actually connected to God by the new birth. That's the language of the heart that's moved from just being a moral person to being a real Christian. Have you done that? Have you made that move? Are you bearing fruit or do you have a formal connection to him? Now, the last thing. The gardener is not just out there looking for fruit. He's also out there when he finds the dead branch, he tears it off. When he finds a live branch, he prunes it. Now, this is the last point, but it's a very important point. I want to take just three or four moments to let it sink in. The vine dresser, the gardener, is someone whose job is what? To bring out the very best in the vine, to bring out its productivity, to develop it, to bring out the power and the productivity of the plant.

#### **[00:22:01.920] - Speaker 1**

It's his job to bring out the best in the vine. So, what does he do? He attacks it. I was reading about how pruning is the most important thing that you can do to really stimulate the productivity and the beauty and the growth and the power and the size of a vine. I was reading about this and talking to people every week, every year, we spend one day a week on Lake Erie, which is the vineyard part of the world. I was told that it's not fertilizing, it's not digging, it's not planting. The main thing the vine dresser does is periodically, he goes in there and he just prunes those vines mercilessly. If you would go in to a vineyard, vineyard right after the pruning, to go in with an ignorant eye, you would be absolutely shocked. Because what you would see is you would see all over the ground lots of beautiful bright green leaves on the ground. Not only that, but even incipient clusters of grapes. Grapes that were starting to come in and now have been ripped out just before they could actually mature. You look at that poor vine itself bleeding at 100 points from the steel that has so remorselessly attacked it.

**[00:23:28.620] - Speaker 1**

To the ignorant eye, you say, a waste. But the skillful eye knows this, that there wasn't a single random stroke, and that every stroke against the vine was there to protect it and to develop it, not to destroy its life at all. Or put it this way, there was nothing cut off that was not a gain to lose and would have been a loss to keep. Now, this is scary because you see, this is a principle that really runs through everything. You give gold ore to a refiner, and what does he do? He puts it through the furnace. You give an athlete to a coach, and what does the coach do? The coach, one more time around the track, and you feel like you're dying. You give a child to a parent, and what does the parent do? The parent continually disciplines the child. That means a child lies, "You lied! Well, my son, I know that if you grow up lying, you're going to have the most miserable life possible, and therefore, you're grounded tonight and you cannot go out with your friends." What does the child say? "This is the end of my life. If I can't go out with these particular friends on this particular instance in this particular time, I want you to know my social life is ruined forever, and I hold you personally responsible." The refiner is given the ore. The vine dresser is given the vine. The parent is given the child. The coach is given the prime athlete. What do they do? Cut, burn, stretch, wipe out, ruin their social life. Why? Because you see, through caring for design under controlled conditions for the purpose of growth, the only way to develop those things is to hurt them.

Now, this is pretty frightening, but this is what we have to conclude. If Jesus Christ is telling you that if you are really a Christian, the Father will prune you, that means this. Some of you can look at your life right now and you can see yourself bleeding at 100 places. You can see things on the ground that he's cut off and cut away. Incipient clusters of grapes, might have been, missed opportunities, things that look like now they'll never come back. How can he do this? What I want to know is this. Are you looking at your life with the ignorant eye of a person who doesn't know anything about vine dressing or the skillful eye of a person who knows that not one thing has been cut away, that would not have been a loss to keep, you see? And that would not actually be a gain to lose.

A skillful person knows what the vine dresser is doing. Do you know what the Vine Dresser is doing? A child doesn't understand right. The child says, "This is the end of my life!" Why did you laugh when I told you that story? Ha, ha, ha. He's a child. He doesn't have perspective. Why don't you assume that you don't have perspective? Why don't you assume that the things that look like have been, look like they have been merciless attacks on you by God, things that look like they have made your... That God has made your life into a sense of slaughter. That's how a child feels in the hands of a parent. That's got to be how the iron ore feels, the gold ore feels on the way through the furnace. That's certainly how the vine feels in the hands of the vinedresser, and that's often how a Christian feels in the hands of his Father. But I tell you this, look at what he has done, not with the ignorant eye, but with the skillful eye. Nothing that he has done to you, nothing he has taken away from you would not have been a loss to keep.

**[00:27:24.300] - Speaker 1**

Well, you say, why does God prune me? Or why does a vine dresser prune the vine? You know why? The biological reason? To get the branches, to draw on the stem in a way it never has before. That is what really develops it. When you find yourself being pruned, when you find yourself being tested, when

you find yourself going through suffering, when you find yourself going through loss, here's what I tell you that you must do. Three things. Number one, learn. Number two, trust. Number three, obey. Real brief and we're done. Number What do you mean by learn? You say, "Why was this cut off of me? Why have I lost this? Why have I lost this?" The answer is because I thought it was a stem and I was sucking on it. I was trying to get my life out of it. Now I see that God wants me to get my life out of him. You see, one of the problems with branches, sometimes, here's a branch going into the stem, but sometimes branches develop, growths out of the branch that get bigger than the branch and even bigger than the stem.

### **[00:28:32.290] - Speaker 1**

In a certain sense, that's what can happen to us. The things that really hurt us is when God takes out of our life things that we have begun to mistake for the stem, things that we have decided, this is my life, this is my security, this is the thing from which I'm going to get my life. When you find yourself under the pruning knife of God, you have to immediately start to say, "What? What's going on? I know. I know. This has become too important to me. This has become my stem. This has This would enslave me if God didn't do something about it. I would be beholding to it. This would be running my life. Well, it's not going to. I'm going to learn." Secondly, trust. Trust his schedule, trust his appointment, trust his agenda. It's not your schedule and it's not your agenda. Where you say, "How can I trust him? I can't trust him." Maybe your inability to trust God is really an unwillingness to mistrust your own judgment. It's easy to trust You just stop trusting your own. It's easy to start trusting God's insight. You start mistrusting your own insight.

### **[00:29:37.910] - Speaker 1**

You start to say, "Well, just like the child thinks this is the end of my social life, maybe I think this is the end of my life. I lack perspective. Of course, I lack perspective. Or I wouldn't have a Father disciplining me. I wouldn't have a vine dresser pruning me." Lastly, obey. When you're under the knife, when you feel the steel, cling to the vine. That's the of the steel. An ounce of sin can kill you in a way that 10 tons of suffering can't. Stay close to him. Keep up your time with him. Obey, don't disobey. Go to him. Go to him and hold on to him. Are you in the vine? Martin Luther and John Wesley were very religious people. They were ministers before they were converted. They were mechanically religious people. They were But one day, they began to realize for the first time that sin is not just breaking the rules. They got convicted of something deeper, the sin of self-will, the sin of self-righteous, the sin of thinking that they could be their own savior. They received Christ as savior, and they forsook their own works, and they gave their lives to him totally. When that happened, they stopped just mechanically growing, and they began to actually grow riper and wiser and deeper and growing in the supernatural character change of Jesus. Are you in the vine? Or are you just formally related to him? "I am the vine, you are the branches. My Father is the gardener, and even if you bear fruit, I'll prune you." So what? So that you can bear even more fruit.

Let's pray. Father, what we're going to do now is spend some time thinking about how we can give ourselves to you. During the offering time, help us to do that. Help us to act on what you have told us here in this word. We pray this now in Jesus' name. Amen.