

When Keren and I first moved into our house seven years ago one of the first things we did was plant a few trees near our house. We chose to plant an eastern redbud tree which has beautiful purple flowers in the spring and a peach tree, which not only has a lovely pink flower in the spring but produces my all-time favorite fruit. The peach tree started out small; it wasn't even three feet tall. But year after year it grew. It produced no fruit the first several years, then two or three peaches, then fifteen or twenty peaches, and then in 2022, it blew up and produced about 300 peaches. It was my dream come true. We were swimming in peaches. The entire family was pounding 3-5 peaches a day. Juice was dripping down our chins. I had peach stains on all my clothes. I could not have been happier. So you can imagine how excited we were going into 2023: if we had 300 in 2022, who knows, we might have 500, maybe 600 the following summer.

Well, spring came and we noticed something strange on our trees. Instead of the normal bloom and flowers, there was a gelatin-like substance. When the leaves came in, they all had what is called peach leaf curl. The tree we loved that had given us so much fruit didn't produce a single peach that year. The entire Hamel household was dejected.

If you have been here for any length of time, you know I don't need any special reason to talk about trees, but I bring it up today because, as we continue our series in the gospel of John in chapter 15, Jesus talks to his disciples about bearing fruit. Not the kind of fruit we get from a tree or the produce section of a store, but rather the quality of our lives, our character, our good deeds, our commitment to love God and love people and make disciples. Jesus doesn't want to approach our lives and see leaf curl and disease, inward focus and pride, selfishness, and arrogance; he wants to see evidence that our lives have been transformed by his grace and that we are blessing and serving others in his name. Let's take a look and dive in.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also 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. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

Every Christian I know wants this passage to be true of them, especially the last verse! Don't you? We want to stay connected to Jesus, we want our lives to be full of good fruit, and we want our lives to bring glory to God. If that is our desire, if that is our end goal, what steps do we need to take? In his passage, Jesus tells us there are three simple postures we need to take. Here's the first:

To produce a life of abundant fruit, I must renounce reliance on myself.

We see this clearly taught in two different verses: "No branch can bear fruit by itself" (John 15:4), and, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). I want to highlight a few different words in this teaching. Jesus says that "no branch" is able to bear fruit by itself and that apart from him, we can do "nothing." What that means is that there are a grand total of absolutely zero people, none at all, who are

able to produce the kind of fruit God is looking for by themselves. Not me, not you, not the pope, not Mother Teresa, not Billy Graham. No one. Oftentimes we have the tendency to be delusional in our thinking because we are blinded by hubris. Obviously other people, less intelligent, less winsome, less charismatic, less capable, certainly can't produce fruit on their own. If anything good is going to come from their life, it's going to *have* to be God! But me, I'm smarter than the average bear. A little better looking, a little quicker on my feet, a little faster at quality decision making. There's a lot I can do on my own. Wrong. You cannot bear fruit on your own. Here is something I have to say to myself on a regular basis, sometimes daily: "I cannot do anything that will last for eternity without absolute dependency on Jesus."

There is a fascinating story in the Old Testament about the Israelites as they were coming into the promised land. God was speaking to them on a regular basis and they were seeing his miraculous power in victory after victory. There was a tribe there in the land that witnessed God's favor and power on the Israelites; the people were terrified that they would be destroyed by the Israelites. So they hatched a plan to deceive the Israelites and trick them to entering into a treaty with them. The Bible literally says they "resorted to a ruse." They got some of their leaders together and dressed them in old clothes and put worn-out sandals on their feet. They gave them dry, moldy food that was way past the expiration date. They were pretending to be a caravan of travelers from a far-off land, even though they were in reality next door neighbors. They said to the Israelites, "We have come from a far-off land. Please make a treaty with us." At first the Israelites leaders were suspicious: "How do we know you aren't from around here? How do we know you are who you say you are?" They said, "Look at all this evidence—we are clearly from far away. Make a treaty with us." How did the Israelites respond? "The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord" (Joshua 9:14). They used their wisdom, they used their senses, they used their discernment, they did all the due diligence that anyone would have thought was necessary, but they did not inquire of the Lord. Because they relied on themselves instead of God, they made a dumb decision that they regretted almost immediately! And we are just like them, aren't we? When we rely on ourselves and forget to consult the Lord or rely on the Lord, we end up in that exact same place as they were, looking just as foolish as they did.

My son loves to fly his kite. Once or twice a week when the weather is good, he will ask me if we can go outside and fly his kite. I almost always say yes. But you know how different it is to fly a kite when the air is stagnant and when there is a twenty-mile-an-hour breeze. When the wind isn't blowing, Hudson has to hold his hand as high as he can, take off on a dead sprint, and hope to get four or five seconds of air time, generated entirely by his own energy. When the wind is blowing, all we have to do is stand there and watch the kite soar. That's the difference between trying to do the right thing in your own strength and relying on the strength that God provides to live the life to which you know he has called you.

To produce a life of abundant fruit, I must remain connected to Jesus.

A branch on a tree doesn't have to labor, strain, and groan to produce fruit; it only has one job: stay connected to the tree. "Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 15:4). "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). Jesus is the source of life, energy, vitality, wisdom, strength, and power, and for our lives to bear fruit, we must remain connected to him. That's the most important task I have every single day. Let's talk about steps we can take to either deepen our connection with Jesus or diminish our connection with Jesus.

How to deepen our connection with Jesus:

- **Scripture.** We grow in our connection to Jesus as we read, reflect on, meditate on, and memorize his Word. In 1 Samuel 3:21, we read, "The Lord revealed himself to Samuel through his word." As you

spend time in the Word, God speaks to you. This is springing up all over the place at our church. A few days ago someone sent our family a photo of a brother and sister at home, choosing to spend their free time reading the Bible. Praise God for the next generation taking delight in God's word.

- **Prayer.** If Scripture is God speaking to us, prayer is our chance to speak back to God and talk to God. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances." We can talk to God like we talk to friend, having conversations about about everything going on in our lives, things we are excited about, things we are nervous about, needs we have, hopes, dreams and aspirations we have. Just last week about 40 men from our church gathered in an old barn one evening to spend time praying together and asking God to help them grow in their faith and become the sort of Christ-like leaders he wants in their homes, at work, in their community, at church. God meets us as we pray to him.
- **Silence.** If Scripture is God speaking to us, and prayer is us speaking to God, silence is the space that develops in a mature relationship where no one has to say anything and you simply enjoy one another's presence. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still and know that I am God." There is a knowledge of God that comes only in stillness and silence. I can remember as a teenager sometimes being at a restaurant and seeing a couple in their seventies or eighties eating a meal and thinking to myself, how boring, they aren't even talking to one another, their relationship must have grown stale. I thought that because I was an impetuous teenager and all I ever did was talk. Now I see those couples dining together, having been married 50 or 60 years, and I think to myself, how beautiful, what a dream, what an inspiration. Silence allows you to simply linger in God's presence. Whenever I am teaching someone to pray, I often encourage them to take the first 3-5 minutes and the last 3-5 minutes of their prayer time, and not to read, not to write, not to say anything at all—just focus on being in God's presence and enjoying him.
- **Community.** The right relationships always propel us closer to Jesus. In Philippians 3:17 the Apostle Paul says, "Join with others in following my example." The Christian life is personal, but it is never private. This week we had all the life groups at our church meet together for a vision night. In conversation I probably heard over a dozen different people say, "I am so much closer to Jesus because of doing life in this community." If you haven't found that community here yet, we'd love to help you take that step. We have an entire team of staff members who give their full-time attention to that!

These are all steps we can take to deepen our connection, but there are pitfalls that we have to be mindful of as well. There are several threats at work against us. We'd be wise to talk about those as well.

How to diminish our connection with Jesus:

- **Distraction.** Our sense of intimacy with Jesus can be siphoned off by simply losing our focus on Jesus. Colossians 3:2 tells us, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Far and away the most prevalent distraction for most of us is through our phones. They are an insistent drip that is clamoring for our attention, a little five-inch window through which the entire world can come at us. Keren and I were watching a dating show where people fall in love without seeing each other. In this season there was a couple who we thought had the best chance of being together. They had the strongest connection, the most emotional maturity, but as soon as they left their controlled environment, their connection went from off the charts, 10 out of 10, to zero. Do you know what happened? The man was addicted to his phone. He literally sat there and talked about how much he loved his device. The woman he proposed to was in the room with him, talking to him, trying to make plans, emotionally connect with him, and he never lifted up his eyes. This phone can not only diminish your connection with other people, but it can also diminish your connection with God. Set limits on this, leave it out of your room, do whatever it takes to break dependency. We must renounce distraction so we can grow in devotion.

- **Materialism.** Materialism is an unhealthy focus on material things—money, clothes, cars, trips, experiences, purchases. The natural course of life in this world is to get unconsciously consumed with all these material things. But listen to what God’s word says: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them” (1 John 2:15). That seems pretty intense, very extreme, but it’s not only this passage. Jesus himself says it in Matthew 6:24, “You cannot serve both God and money.” Consumerism and connection to Jesus cannot go hand in hand. I’ve found myself convicted of this recently. A few months ago, I found myself spending a lot of time on Facebook Marketplace. While I was on there, I would discover all these things I didn’t know I needed that I now wanted. Several nights a week, after the kids went to bed, I found myself scrolling through stuff I could buy, researching items, strategizing ways to acquire them. Not one moment of that time helped me grow in my connection to Jesus.
- **Busyness.** Dallas Willard, one of my favorite authors, has said, “Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day.” I am reminded of what Jesus said to Martha in Luke 10:41: “You are worried and upset about many things.” There are times in the Hamel family when Keren and I have so many commitments to things here at church, and to things at school, and to things with the kids, and to things with friends, and to things with family that we barely have time for one another. We are still married, we still love one another, but we’re not really aligned with one another. The same can happen with the Lord.
- **Self-centeredness.** Almost every time we see a photo that we are in, where do our eyes instantly focus? On ourselves. We want to see how we look. Now that’s natural and understandable. But sometimes we end up spending not only a few seconds, but an entire day, week, month, or extended season of our lives focused entirely on ourselves—how we think, how we feel, how others perceive us, what we want. The Greek tale of Narcissus is of a person who looked at his own reflection in a pool of water so long he eventually drowned. Self-centeredness will drown you spiritually in the exact same way. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

To produce a life of abundant fruit, I must accept pruning from the Father.

Let’s cut to the chase: pruning is not an enjoyable process. Pruning is both humbling and painful. It’s humbling because it means there are dead places in our lives that need to be cut off and no one wants to confront that reality. And it’s painful because pruning shears are sharp. But God always does it for a purpose. Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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” (John 15:1-2). At our house, Keren and I have two vines that grow up a trellis near our front door. Every spring we go to those vines that grew 12-14 feet high the previous year and trim them. Every year I am so reluctant, so hesitant to cut them back, because it seems like I’m harming the vines. But as counter intuitive as it is, the more you cut a vine back in the spring, the more it grows the rest of the year. A good gardener prunes a vine or a tree for greater health, God does the same for us. He does it because he loves us and wants the very best for us. He’s like a masterful doctor who with x-ray accuracy identifies areas of unhealth, areas in our lives that are a threat to our overall well-being, and then with the clinical skill of a surgeon, he knows right where to put the knife, he knows right where to cut to remove them as quickly as possible so we can thrive.

In my own life I’ve seen God identify areas that needed pruning. I can think of specific seasons when pride and arrogance were driving nearly 100% of my decisions. God humbled me in a very public, very embarrassing, very humiliating way. I didn’t learn my lesson. He humbled me again. I still didn’t learn my lesson, so he humbled me again. It took me years to learn how to walk in humility. And I’m still having to grow on a daily basis. But all of those pruning snips, though painful, were absolutely necessary. As you look at your life, what does God need to prune away so your life can bear fruit for his glory? Does he need to prune away that friendship that always seems to pull you down? Does he need to prune away

Netflix or social media because it consumes too much of your time? Does he need to prune away your anger and the harsh way you respond to people who don't agree with you? Wherever the area is, don't run from the pruning. No one wants to have surgery, but if you have a cancer in you, squirming under the knife isn't going to make things better. Be calm. Be patient. Trust the love and the knowledge of God, and let him graciously remove everything in your life that doesn't make you more like Jesus, so you can bear fruit and bring him glory.

I began today by talking about my peach tree, how it got a disease and didn't produce any fruit. What do you think I did? Decide that it's hopeless and never expect to eat another peach from it again? Cut it down and plant another one? No. We brought out a tree doctor. We've fertilized it. We've pruned it. We've sprayed it with chemicals. We are doing everything we possibly can to get that tree healthy again. And now it's spring, so we are watching and waiting with complete anticipation. That is the heart of God for you. He knows you. He loves you. He is asking you to renounce reliance on yourself, to cultivate your connection to Jesus, humbly receive his pruning, and then he sits back and watches with anticipation the ways your life will be used to bring him glory.