

Fruitful Living: The Semi Circle

Personal experience – “I don’t really understand how to order my life, it is a complex affair”

We often start by taking it down to its component parts and rebuilding it in a “reductionist approach”

This is the wrong approach. We should look at our life as a whole and look at the rhythms God calls us to and allow them to shape our lives.

Let’s look at John 15 – “Read a large portion and marinate it for a while!”

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He 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. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain 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. (John 15:1 – 4)

Jesus goes on to speak about the effects of remaining in him and what the fruit looks like. Put simply, it looks like love and the laying down of your own life for those you call friends.

Context – “Come let us leave.” Jesus and his disciples were on a journey through the streets of Jerusalem.

Most Jewish houses had an upper room; in reality it was more of an annexe on the roof of the house for pilgrims. So they walked down the steps from the roof into the thronging streets of Jerusalem. Don’t forget there would have been nearly half a million people there for the Passover – with the smell of roast lamb, and the sound of Psalms being sung from windows.

To get to the Mount of Olives they would have walked through the Kidron valley past Temple Mount. The Temple was embossed in gold and silver and proudly displayed the symbol of Israel from **Psalm 80**, “The Vine”. Jesus, noticing the Vine says **“I am the true vine”**.

Then past the temple, past the pools for ritual ablutions, where in 6 weeks time the first Christians would gather, the only location 3000 people could be baptised.

In front of him would have been the olive groves and vineyards. Jesus continues to teach using the metaphor that was riven into the very soul of every Israelite. Every Israelite had their own fig tree and vine and everyone knew how to grow them!

Vine Maintenance - for the first 3 years vines were allowed to grow as a stocky tree but not allowed to bear fruit. At the end of each blossoming season they would be cut back, then after three years they would be allowed to bear fruit.

An interesting parallel with the life of Jesus, fruit came after his first 3 years.

After the fruit had been picked the branches were pruned back to 3mm.

Literally, in the slow growing months of autumn it would abide in the vine, the vine would grow around it. Then in spring time green tendrils would emerge and be supported by crutches, and because they were supported they were able to support the fruit.

It was also fruit that would last; the grapes would happily stay on the vine for several months before being picked. However, the moment the fruit was taken the branch would be cut back.

What is Jesus saying? – Well, my Father is the gardener who supports and cuts back the branches. Why? He has called you to bear much fruit and unless you learn to abide in Him you cannot bear fruit.

Fruit in this sense is the multiplication of the DNA of the fruit. I love you; you love one another, keep on loving. Love is being multiplied among them.

Jesus has multiplied his life into his disciples and he is calling his disciples to do the same. We are called to bear fruit but we can only do this if we learn to understand this rhythmic cycle.

Between abiding and bearing fruit we grow. However, when we have borne fruit we are pruned so that more fruit can be borne in the future.

Our understanding of success is constant growing and constant fruit bearing.

Yet Jesus says that every branch that bears fruit will be pruned.

I have often heard ministers say – “Is God against us? – No matter what we do we don’t seem to be bearing fruit?”

Jesus could not have made it clearer, “Your Father is the gardener and he will cut your branches off the moment you bear fruit. He’s not doing it to be mean but because he wants you to bear more fruit in the future!”

God is totally for us. There is a rhythm to individual and corporate life! We are not going to get it by simply going all out for it!

Let's do some Biblical detective work together because "Fruitfulness" is a word we can follow through scripture. It's much easier than "abide" or "remain".

"Fruitful" is a very common word and quite clearly Jesus knew his Old Testament. In fact, it is found on the very first page of the Bible (depending on how long your footnotes are!).

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Genesis 1:26 – 28

So God makes human beings in his image – in fact, the word is more "imprint." Image at the time was not identified with reflection; don't forget they had no mirrors yet! We are talking about the imprint of God, literally his hand placed in ours.

He has made us and left his imprint on us. His hand is always to be imprinted in us. Without this we are empty.

What were the first words spoken over humanity?

"Be fruitful and increase in number". But the meaning of this was wider than just having babies. It was the call upon humanity to produce something. A call that was consistent with the image of God who has just produced the Cosmos. Our task was to take the stuff of the world and make something.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." Genesis 2:15

Productivity is deeply connected with work.

Retirement is sub human! The calling of humanity is always to work, not always to be employed but to be involved in intentional activity. There will be work in heaven, because is what it means to be a human being.

In our work we are supposed to be fruitful. To post-modern congregations this is not a popular message. For the Boomers, got it, check it off, move on!

"² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." Genesis 2:2

This is fascinating; having made human beings in the image of God what is their first experience? A day of rest!!

You are designed to work from rest not rest from work. This is not just a clever play on words but a fundamental revelation of God's creation revealed in Scripture that Jesus is drawing upon in John 15.

This is not rest from a lot of work! If that is the design specification guess what would happen if we got it backwards? You get the USA!

Keep running a car in first gear and it will break down. Move into reverse gear and you crash into other people as well as breaking down!

Allow this word to squeeze you a little. A Kairos moment is opening up. It's so easy to say let's ignore this bit; to put it in a compartment under mystic spirituality and I will get to it eventually.

Let me turn the screw for you!

Exodus – The 10 Commandments are boundary markers for our covenant relationship. One of these markers is "take a day off".

Not taking a day off is as bad as murder, maybe not socially but individually!

Do you hear what God is saying? This is really, really important, not moderately important like the Reformation.

This is a creation ordinance - Man, Woman day off! And yet we never teach it to anyone and we don't even live it! Why not teach the sabbath as part of the abiding time? Most people are on holiday anyway!

Do you choose to challenge the culture you live in? It does not have to be this way! People can produce more by doing less. Are we prepared to do what Daniel did in terms of our productivity? Why don't you let me do what I do and if it doesn't work I will do what everyone else does.

You don't have to work all the time to produce just as much – this is gospel (Good News) transforming 1000's of lives and churches. We will see fruit if we choose to abide, and we are called to bear much fruit!!

Some more biblical models:-

1 Kings 17 - the story of Elijah. We have looked at Moses with the 10 Commandments and as Elijah was at the transfiguration he is probably worth looking at as well!

We have no record of any other prophetic words before this – imagine coming out with this on your first go!

**“As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”
(1 Kings 17:1)**

Elijah had just embarked on this hugely significant prophetic ministry and then receives a personal word.

“Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan.” (1 Kings 17:3)

What about Jesus, the Son of God? He had just received the words of heavenly affirmation in the river. The Spirit descends and then he is taken into the desert for six weeks.

What about in Capernaum where Jesus heals Peter’s mother in law? She gets healed and cooks dinner for the group. The whole town is at the door and He heals all the demons and the sick.

So what does Jesus do? After his first day doing ministry he disappears!

The disciples search the city. Where is he? Eventually they find Jesus is out on the hills praying.

Revival is beginning, we should be pitching the tent, starting the dvd ministry and having a meeting morning and evening every day! This is what everyone had been waiting for.

But Jesus says, **“let’s go somewhere else” (Mark 1:35)**. Where would he have got that information from if he was following the “work till you drop” mentality? He would have remained a revivalist preacher in Capernaum

“Jesus was often found in lonely places praying.” (Luke 5:16)

There is rhythm found in the created order and the lives of the great saints throughout scripture.

Why is it not in our lives individually and corporately? There has got to be a reason why. Unless you abide, retreat and return with me you cannot be productive!

