

# LESSONS FROM THE ORCHARD

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Text: John 15:1-8

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## SCRIPTURE

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John 15:1-8

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup> He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes<sup>[a]</sup> to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You have already been cleansed<sup>[b]</sup> by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become<sup>[c]</sup> my disciples.

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## SERMON

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As we come into full spring, celebrating the renewal of life in Easter, many begin to think of planting gardens and working in the yard. Today we celebrate the Gifts of Women, and I know many women love to garden, and for that matter, are nurturers in general. I come at this from a bit of a unique perspective, as my family has an apple orchard between Waukon and Decorah. I helped with the initial planting back in 1975, and they now have more than 1000 trees, with over 12 varieties. Orchard work is very labor intensive, but most of the work is done by family members and friends. Like anything, it helps to know what you're doing!

The scripture today talks about vineyards, but there are many similarities to apple orchards, and they both have much to tell us about growing faithful Christians and churches. I'd like to share some of these points with you today.

**Pruning:** John talks about the need for pruning. By pruning the trees, you help the energy of the tree to be directed to the limbs which will be bearing fruit. It also trims away extra branches and limbs that prevent the sun from reaching each branch. The pruning must be done early in the spring – often in the snow, before the sap begins to run in the trees. It takes a long time and sometimes the spring comes fast and time runs out! In the orchard it's clear how much impact the sun has. If a leaf is very close to the apple you can often see the outline of that leaf where the sun was blocked, for the apple stays green and doesn't turn red. In our lives God prunes us so that we bear the best fruit and so that we can ripen in the light of the Son of God! Often we don't like to have some of our favorite branches pruned, but unless we are focused on the things that matter in our faith we won't bear much fruit for God with all the clutter of branches and leaves that won't help us grow!

**Grafting:** The days where Johnny Appleseed could plant apple seeds that produced trees are long gone. Almost all the modern hybrid varieties have to be grafted onto stronger root stock to have the strength and vigor to support a good tree and a good crop. The tasty apples such as Honeycrisp, Fireside, Pink Ladies, Granny Smith or even Red Delicious will not thrive unless they have been grafted. Their root systems cannot sustain the tree. In fact, if you plant the seeds of these apples it's hard to say what kind of tree would grow – chances are it would be some strange tasting apple because of the root system. We like to think that we can thrive in our own strength and energy, but the truth is – we can't! As Christians we must be grafted into the root of God so that we can have the strength we need. Without a strong root system we are too vulnerable to the storms of life.

**Pollination:** The sight of all the trees in the orchard bursting into blossom is quite spectacular. Each of those blossoms is a potential apple. The thing is, unless those blossoms are each pollinated by bees, they cannot convert to a fruit. That has become more and more of a problem. Bees are in trouble. We used to have our own hives, but rodents and pesticides and disease wiped them out. The only way our orchard produces is if we rent a hive of bees in the spring until their work is done. You must capture the queen bee, then the rest of the drones will follow, so it is possible to move hives of bees. While this isn't as clear an example in our lives, to me it follows the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We can hear of Jesus, and the stories of the Bible, but unless we allow the Holy Spirit into our hearts to guide and direct us, we don't end up bearing fruit.

**Spreaders:** When the tree is young, boards are often put in place to encourage the branches to spread wider – the closer to perpendicular they are, the more they are able to support a full load of fruit. When they are at a more acute angle they often break off with a load of fruit. Our lives are the same way. God uses hard things in our lives to strengthen us, to stretch us, so that we can bear the load of fruit we will hopefully bear. We often resent those things that push us to reach wider but left to our own devices, we don't have the wisdom to stretch so that we can carry our burdens.

**Wrapping:** When the trees are young they are susceptible to sun scald, so their trunks need to be wrapped for protection from the sun. If they get too much sun on the trunk, it can be very damaging. Another reason to wrap is to prevent the mice in the winter from nibbling on the bark at the base of the tree. If the bark gets ringed – nibbled all the way around, the tree dies. When we first started we had to use a wrap that had to be put on each fall and taken off each spring to prevent damage – thankfully now there are products which can allow the trunk to breathe and grow with the trees which cuts way down on labor! We need to protect our young people from the scalding of society – lest they be damaged. And we need sunscreen for protection as well!

**Maintaining the Orchard:** The orchard needs to be mowed, sprayed, and kept neat. Otherwise disease and pests move in. We keep special apple shaped insect traps in the trees so that we can know what insects are in the trees. It's even important to make sure that a certain kind of evergreen tree – a cedar tree - isn't too close, for it often brings a particular disease. We need to make sure there are no volunteer cedar trees in the ditches or sinkholes nearby. There are sprays that help with pests, and some kinds help the tree set the right amount of fruit. As much as we'd like to go organic we've found we cannot achieve good fruit without some judicious sprays.

Last spring the neighbor sprayed RoundUp on his field and the overdrift destroyed several rows of fruit. Thankfully it didn't destroy the trees, but the fruit could not be sold.

Not only is pruning hard work, but all the limbs as well as the fallen fruit must be picked up to keep things healthy. The limbs must then be burned just as our passage in John says, or they attract pests and disease. It's always a fun time to have a bonfire and wiener roast when the pruning and stick collecting are finally done for the season! The orchard needs to be inspected regularly for blight – especially fire blight – and if it is detected, any affected trees must be cut down immediately and burned or it spreads through the orchard like wildfire. There is a lot to know! The pruned branches in our lives must be gathered and burned as well so they don't offer a good place for pests to dwell, and we must be careful not to let potential harm rest within us. We need to learn how to care for ourselves as well – we need to study our manual (Bible) and keep watch for things in our lives which can cause us to become unhealthy. Faith takes frequent prayer for maintenance!

Right picking: Did you know there is a right way and a wrong way to pick an apple? There is! It's important to know how to pick an apple correctly so you do not damage the tree! Don't pull down on the apple – if you do, you can pull the fruit spur off the tree (if the stem doesn't end squarely, but has an angled piece attached you've gotten the fruit spur, too). If you pull off the fruit spur it takes the tree an extra year to form another fruit spur, and then a second year to produce an apple. If you get only the apple, the tree can produce another apple there the next year. The right way to pick is to lift an apple up. The stem will release from the spur, and no damage is done. Once it's picked, the apple must be handled with care lest it bruise. It's the same thing in life. If we bruise and pull each other down, we are always in danger of damaging each other. When we are hurt, we produce less fruit. When we lift each other up, not only do we bear more fruit, but we don't damage their capacity to bear fruit.

I have a feeling we can all relate to being pulled down instead of lifted up. So often Christians who are trying to convince others to come to faith use harsh and judgmental methods. They are critical and act like their way is the only way to believe. I'll bet you've all been turned off by an approach like that. It's a hard way to make faith seem attractive. I'd like to share an experience from my own life.

When going through a difficult divorce when my children were small, I found it difficult to be comfortable in church. So many were harsh and judgmental, so often we just didn't go. I was beating myself up pretty harshly over this failure and telling a friend how hard it was. You can imagine my surprise when the friend said, "Oh! You are so WISE!" After I picked my jaw up off the floor I asked, "Wise??" She said, "Yes. You have been wounded so badly! If you had a cut on your leg you wouldn't keep pulling the wound open to see if it was healing yet. You would just let it heal. In God's time you are going to blossom and bear fruit for God. Let yourself heal!" Obviously, in God's time my life did blossom and I spent many years in ministry, hopefully bearing fruit. That my friends, is lifting someone up rather than pulling them down!

There are many parallels between tending an orchard and growing a church! Both take hard work and study, and being willing to be pruned and grafted and cared for, but most of all, staying rooted in and connected to the source of strength and wisdom, our Lord Jesus Christ.