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Communion Sunday - The Cursed Fig Tree

Mark 11:12-14

Prayer: *Father, I just thank you for your grace, I thank you for all the little ones that are here and what a blessing that is. Again, this is a day that we're going to spend thinking of you and the gift that you are to us particularly with the cross that you have borne for us. And so this morning, Lord, I pray that you would give us just an extra measure of grace, the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would guide us, walk with us and give us the ability to make this of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well like I said, this is the day that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. And we always start out by reading about the night before he died when he met with his disciples and for the last time celebrated a Passover supper. This is in *Matthew 26*. It says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my*

blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

So Jesus took bread and he took wine, he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup so that they might symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. And then he asked them to repeat the remembrance of this sacrifice on a regular basis; we call that "the Lord's table." We in particular celebrate it once a month, we do that by meditating on what the Lord Jesus did on the cross, by examining ourselves, asking God's help through his Holy Spirit to point out areas where he's convicting us of sin and then we confess our sins and participate in the elements. *John 6:53* says: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Well we're following the life of Christ, we're following it in the gospel of Mark and where we are right now, Jesus is on the final stretch of his public ministry. His crucifixion is literally days away. He's just made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem; it's now the day after and we find him undertaking his very last miracle,

perhaps the most misunderstood and frankly the most bizarre miracle Jesus has ever done. It's found in *Mark 11:12*. It says: *On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*

Well the next section of scripture, that's verses 15 through 20 covers the incident of Jesus cleansing the temple and that requires a separate look that we're going to take next time; but this morning I want to look at Jesus as the ultimate horticulturist, that's someone who's determined to grow fruit. And this incident with the fig tree continues after Jesus has cleansed the temple.

We pick up on verse 20 and 21. It says: *As they passed by in the morning -- that's the next morning -- they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."* Well, I think the first thing that we can dispense with is the notion that Jesus was simply annoyed at the tree for not having any fruit, I mean, that he petulantly cursed it because of that. First of all, we know Jesus has access to all knowledge as God himself, and we

also know he chose to limit himself to a visual inspection of this tree. We also know that Jesus never did anything without purpose and that there was purpose in this.

It says the fig tree was in leaf and even though it was said it's not the time for figs, what's unique about this particular type of fruit tree, this particular type of fig tree is that it puts out two different types of figs. One of them is an immature budding fig that appears at the same time as the leaves and that can be eaten as well; and the other is the fully developed fig that ripens considerably later. And so what Jesus would have been looking for on this tree that is just leafed out was those edible baby things that indicate that just a normal crop was growing. And that it had none provided Jesus with this perfect analogy to describe Israel itself as this fig tree, and he did so knowing that his Father had long ago given Israel the very same description.

Having described Israel's leaders way back when as backslidden and determined to rebel against God, God said this in *Jeremiah 8:11*:
"They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD. When

I would gather them, declares the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them."

So way back when here's God the Father saying Israel's a fig tree with no figs, and just like this fig tree that Jesus is examining, it's fruitless. But you know, Jesus also made yet another reference to Israel as a fig tree that simply refused to produce. He did it in a parable. This is *Luke 13*. It says: *And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

Well Jesus, obviously he's not talking about horticulture here. He's talking about the nation of Israel as a fig tree that in spite of all the blessings it's received, it still refuses to bear fruit. And this particular fig tree in our text this morning has been actively cultivated by God through his Son, the vinedresser, for three full years now. *Matthew 4* says: *And he went throughout all*

Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

So after three years of pruning, cultivating and fertilizing Israel, Jesus knew this fruit would not be forthcoming, but he was still pleading, and he was pleading through the parable for one last chance for it. Again, *Luke 13:8* says: "And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

You see, after three years Jesus alone knew something that completely escaped his disciples and that is that the nation was actively involved at that very moment in finding not just a way to refuse to bear fruit but a way to actively seek to kill the vinedresser. This fig tree had actively produced nothing but leaves. There was all kinds of outward expressions of visible growth but it was all show and no substance, and the Passover holiday that Jesus was about to participate in was no exception.

Jerusalem was filling up with pilgrims, they were flocking in from all over Israel to celebrate the fact that the blood of an innocent lamb smeared over a doorpost had saved all those within those

households from the angel of death; again, that was centuries ago when Israel was enslaved in Egypt. And after refusing to let the Israelites go through nine plagues, Pharaoh was finally told that if he doesn't let Israel go, the angel of death will take the firstborn of everyone in Egypt, from Pharaoh's son even down to the cattle. And when he still refuses to let Israel go, the angel comes into Israel, it comes into Israel striking all of those who are not protected by that blood.

And it's now centuries later and the very one that this sacrificial lamb has been pointing to, the very one whose blood is going to protect all those who are under it, is now entering Jerusalem for one final sacrifice. The fig tree had turned a deaf ear to the prophets and the signs that the Messiah had come. Jesus had proven that he was God by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, even raising the dead but it was never, never enough. All of the energy of Israel went to producing bigger and shinier leaves at the expense of the fruit.

And fruit's the issue we're going to look at this morning. You see, communion is really a time to ask ourselves what kind of fruit am I producing?

As the elders begin to pass out the bread, let's begin to examine

our conscience. *1 Corinthians 11* says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.*

And again, I say this each month, I say communion's an extremely serious undertaking. If you enter into communion in an unworthy manner, you are courting disaster. And he plead with you, I've said if you are not absolutely confident that you are a child of the King, if you haven't by faith trusted in Christ as your Savior or if you need to be reconciled to your brother and sister before you bring yourself to this altar, then don't participate; just err on the side of caution.

And then I always say on the other hand, you can make the mistake of thinking that unless you're spotlessly perfect you are unworthy to receive communion; and that, too, is a mistake. Once again I said, being a child of the King doesn't mean you don't sin, it doesn't mean you don't fail; it does mean that you recognize that salvation is a gift, and because it's a gift, no one's capable of

earning it. I repeat each month Dane Ortlund's quote. It says:
"In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do."

I also add when we do fail, we are aware that we failed and we do so because the Spirit of God's now living inside us, he's the one convicting us, and so we grieve because we know that we have a Father who longs to forgive us, who says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

So again, being a child of the King, it doesn't mean that you're without sin. It means that when we do sin we recognize we have an advocate, somebody speaking on our behalf in heaven. And *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*

And so because we have Jesus' righteousness and not our own -- that's the key -- we can bank on his righteousness, not ours, and because of that we're free to eat from his table. So if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that he purchased for you at the cost of his own blood. As I said, he lived the life we

were supposed to live and he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we could be made worthy of heaven. And so we're going to be asking God this morning to show us what type of fruit we're growing for him.

1 Corinthians 11:23 says: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." So take, and eat.

So Jesus curses this fig tree, and he curses it because it's barren of fruit. Again, do you think it's because he was just annoyed and frustrated because he was hungry or do you think he's pointing to a much bigger picture here? Remember, Jesus spent forty days without food in the desert as opposed to this one night before coming upon this fig tree. If you remember, he was at a party the day before, they were celebrating the fact that Lazarus had been raised from the dead and now he's cursing this fig tree, saying, *"May no one ever eat fruit from you again."* Think Jesus is talking about figs or is he talking about something much bigger than figs? What kind of fruit is Jesus talking about here? And how does this apply to us?

You see, God uses this barren fig tree to illustrate the nation of Israel as being uniquely cared for and cultivated, protected and blessed for the purpose of bearing fruit, but they refused to. In doing so, it wound up denying the very purpose for which it was created. You see, fruit is ultimately about the glory of God. God plants, cultivates and protects us so that we might bring him glory.

And you know for some that just doesn't sound right. Just on the surface it raises this question of is God so desperately in need of our praise that he orders and creates creatures designed to give him praise so that he can spend all of eternity just wallowing in that praise? I mean, just give that a moment's thought.

Paul commented on that. One day when he was in the Areopagus and he was observing all of these false gods. This is what he said in Acts 17:22. He says: *So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.'* What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything,

since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."

As Paul says, God is not served at all by human hands as if he needed anything because he needs nothing. Well then again we wonder, okay, why does the psalmist says in *Psalm 148: Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven.*

Well either God has such a monstrously huge ego that it needs to be constantly stroked or it's that God's goodness is something so inherently worthy of praise that all things that are based in that goodness will respond to that goodness with praise.

You know, someone once said that a magnet's still a magnet if there's no metal around it to be drawn to it. The magnet itself, it creates an aura of attraction around itself regardless. A nail's attraction to a magnet isn't because it senses some need in

the magnet to be attractive and thus tries to meet that need. So it is with the glory of God, it creates an aura of majesty around it that regardless of whether or not you acknowledge it, it's there irregardless. If you doubt that, just observe a Colorado mountaintop or a bald eagle in flight or an ocean during a hurricane. They all in a minor way have some kind of aura of majesty around them regardless of whether or not we want to acknowledge it.

So to acknowledge God's glory, it's not something designed to make God feel good but rather it's something simply acknowledging that there's something in us that reacts to the aura of the majesty of God with praise, just like metal does to a magnet.

Why does God point to himself then as an object of worship? Well, simply because there's nothing greater or higher or more majestic than God himself. I mean the fact is if God were to point to anything other than himself as being the height of everything, then whatever it is he's pointing at, that would be God. God has no choice but to point to himself because there's no other takers for that position. And if there were any, they would be God. In fact, God's glory, it's so huge and so overwhelming that the sea roars and the fields exult and the earth rejoices while the heaven is simply glad because to those inanimate things, such a response is

just as natural as a nail clinging to a magnet, at least according to Psalm 96.

You see, the invitation to give God glory is not the cry of a needy ego needing some type of affirmation. That's not how this works at all. You see, everything in creation exists to glorify God, and to glorify simply means to put on display, to demonstrate who God is and what God does. I mean *Psalm 19* says: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.* Paul describes the aura of God that simply demands worship. In *Romans 11:36* he says: *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.* Well the task of everything in creation is to put on display the glory of God.

Just the other day we had circling over our house, we had a bald eagle. And I was looking at that creature and you can't help but look at a creature like that and see it as an expression of God's glory. The same with the hummingbirds that are gathering around my feeder all summer and the flowers in the sky or the trees, everything that surrounds us that has life in itself, everything sings in one way or another of the glory of God.

Even the inanimate creatures, even the inanimate creation sings out as well. And whether it's the mountains or the oceans or the stars

in the sky, everything in all of creation speaks of God's glory. And that's why God tells us in Romans 1 that no one has an excuse for denying that. He says: *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

You see, everything that has been made by God is a demonstration of his eternal power and divine nature, including figs on a fig tree. So what was God getting at with Jesus' condemnation of the fig tree? Well, you see, at the very top of all of creation, above the sun, the moon, the stars, the oceans, the mountains, the cattle and all the other animals lies one single creature who alone was created in the image of God. That's you and that's me. No other creature in all of creation bears the *imago Dei* or the image of God. No other creature has been given a mandate to consciously live in such a way to give glory to God.

I mean, the eagle, the hummingbird, the stars, the mountains, they all glorify God by their very existence. They don't consciously, so far as I know, they don't consciously set about the task of glorifying God but their very existence points to that end. *Psalm 96* says: *Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns! Yes, the world*

is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

You see, what the creation does unconsciously, we as the crown of creation do consciously or not. The Westminster Catechism asks as its first question, what's the chief end of man, and the answer is -- I'm sure you know it by now -- the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

And so the next question that that brings up is just what is the nature of the glory God wants us to give him? I mean, if the seas roar and the fields exult and the earth rejoices and the heavens are simply glad, what do we humans do to glorify God? Well thankfully Jesus doesn't leave us to guess. He tells us very precisely.

This is what he said in *Matthew 5:14*. He said: *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and*

give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

So we have this singular task of bringing glory to God by the light we bring and the works we do, and it dovetails perfectly with what Jesus was demonstrating in this parable of the fig tree. I mean the owner, the owner is God himself, he's got every right to inspect the fruit and to expect from a plant that he's planted, nurtured, protected and watered, that it would produce.

And Jesus goes even further with these agricultural references. He likens all believers to branches on a grapevine. And this time Jesus describes himself as the vine, his Holy Spirit as the water and nutrients that are flowing through the vine and his Father as the vinedresser, shaping and molding the vine.

This is what Jesus says in *John 15*. He says: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone*

does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." And here's the key. "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

There it is precisely. We are here to glorify God and God is glorified how? By us bearing fruit. It says it's the way we prove we're his disciples. It's also the end goal for virtually everything that happens in our lives. I mean if there's one scripture that we repeat endlessly here, it's *Romans 8:28: And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

Well, what fruit bearing is all about is found in the very next verse which tells us exactly what God claims all things are working toward. He says: *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*

I mean you notice, God defines what the good is that all things are working together for. And despite what the prosperity preachers say, it's not health, it's not wealth, it's not prosperity, it's what God says it is; it's conformity to the image of Jesus Christ.

And when God says "all things work together for good," he means every single event in your life has what is called in the Greek a telos, that means it's an end, a point, a direction. And God says every single event in the life of his chosen ones is directed towards shaping and molding them uniquely into the image of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. *Romans 8:29: For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*

You see, everything about your life and my life as Christians is designed to reflect the image of Christ uniquely in us. You can't reflect the image of Jesus Christ like I can, and I can't reflect him like you can because each of us is unique in the reflection each of us bear in the Son, but the reason that we were put on earth is to bear that image and so bring glory to God.

So that leads to the next logical question. Okay, how do we do that? Well, it's all about how we bear the light of God's glory. Listen to what Jesus said in John 8. *John 8:12, Jesus says: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

So in John's gospel Jesus is telling us he is the light of the world, but then in Matthew's gospel he tells us you are the light

of the world. And then he tells us how he wants us to use that light to bring God glory. He says: *"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

There you go. We glorify God by shining our light, by manifesting his character and his attributes. And what that means is the way that we live our lives will demonstrate to our neighbors, our friends, our colleagues, to the world itself, to the spirit world something unique about who God is and what he has done in our lives. I mean the reason we exist is to be walking, living billboards, expressing uniquely the character of the God who created us. And the way we let our light shine is through fruit bearing. We bear fruit the same way a vine bears fruit. And like any vine or tree, the quality is demonstrated, manifested and revealed not by the roots, not by the vine, not by the plant, not by the branches but only by the fruit.

I mean you have a tree or a vine, I've had them with great roots or vines and branches and the fruit is of poor quality or maybe it's even nonexistent. If that's the case then the tree or the vine is of poor quality. That's what Jesus is accused the fig tree of failing at. And Jesus said a tree's quality is established by the fruit that it bears. He says: *"A healthy tree cannot bear bad*

fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."

Jesus understood all about trees and vines and fruit bearing, and his knowledge of these things influenced his analogies about fruit bearing. Strip away all the poetic language and what God is saying is that everyone of his own has been planted on this earth to bring glory to God through the life that they represent and the works that they do. He says each of us are -- we're branches on a vine, we are figs on a fig tree, we are fruit on a fruit tree and we're all capable of producing abundant fruit. I mean, just the fact that Jesus approaches fruit bearing from three different angles points out how incredibly important it is.

Of course that leads to the next logical question. Okay. What is fruit? Well, God gives us an answer to that as well. He says: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* You see, the Lord Jesus Christ, he lived out his life here on earth as a perfect reflection of those nine qualities. Perfect love, perfect joy, perfect peace all the way down the line. The fruit of the spirit is the living embodiment of the loveliness of Jesus. And God is determined to

grow that fruit in you and me.

Way back when when we talked about the fruits of the spirit, we talked about another type of fruit tree, say an orange or a grapefruit and I said that better represents the way the fruit of the spirit brings honor and glory to God because an orange or a grapefruit actually better represents this, it better represents the love of Christ. I mean, you pull an orange or a grapefruit off a tree, you're going to notice that that particular fruit which represents love itself is divided into wedges. You can look at it as having nine different wedges. I can open up that orange or that grapefruit and the wedges inside it define and describe the loveliness of Christ. The fruit itself altogether represents love. And those nine wedges inside it represent individual reflections of that love from love, joy and peace all the way down to faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And that fruit with all nine of those wedges is what God is determined to grow in each of us. He wants us to spend our lives being shaped and molded into the image of Christ by displaying that fruit.

And that may explain why a lot of life for Christians is not nearly the picnic that prosperity preachers would have you think it is. You see, there's a process that every believer in Christ undergoes that's directly related to the fruit that he bears. And once again

Jesus refers to this process specifically. This is what he says. He says: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."*

I'm guessing the fig tree that Jesus cursed, I'm guessing that was never pruned. See, the horticulturist's job is to maximize the production of the highest quality fruit and that's precisely what the Father does: He prunes. And folks, that hurts.

You know, I have a bunch of fruit trees, I've had them for years and years. The first time I ever pruned my fruit trees I was for sure certain I had killed them because I did exactly what they said you're supposed to do, I mean, no branches should ever touch another branch. If two branches touch, you pick out the weaker one and you eliminate it. You're constantly opening up the center of the tree so the sunlight can get into it. And if you've done your job properly the tree looks severely wounded at best and nearly dead at worst. But guess what? As the season goes, that tree blossoms and blooms because it's not fighting itself inside for sunlight and nutrients.

And every one of us as Christians, we've experienced God doing that

pruning in our own lives, opening our lives up so that the Son, S-O-N, can become a central part of it. There's no getting around that that pruning, it hurts. There's also no getting around the fact that God has determined that it is for our good and his glory and he's willing to take us through that hurt to get us to the place of health and vitality where our fruit can be as good as it can possibly be. And what Jesus is saying is that fruit bearing is what glorifies God and the Father as the vinedresser is committed to that goal above all other goals.

So what should be hanging from the lives of redeemed believers is the fruit that represents the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through the vine that represents Jesus himself into branches that are trimmed and pruned by the Father to maximize the production of that fruit. And again, Jesus defined how that happens in *John 17* in his high priestly prayer to his Father. Jesus said: *"I glorify"* -- speaking to his Father -- *"I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."*

Once again he's saying, okay, here's what it's about, manifesting

your name. And to manifest is to make known, and Jesus defines his glorifying the Father as making his name known. It's the exact same task that we've been given and the means to do it is through fruit bearing. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, meekness, gentleness, self-control, those are manifest expressions of the loveliness of Christ. Again, he was perfectly loving, perfectly kind, perfectly gentle, perfectly all those qualities. And so when these fruits begin to manifest themselves in the lives of transformed believers, then God is glorified. It's how these fruits become manifest in our lives that requires study, requires reflection.

I mean, everybody loves to be more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient and kind, I mean, we all want those fruits manifested because not only do they represent the loveliness of Christ, they represent the loveliness of anyone who has them. I mean if somebody actually used those nine words to describe you, you would be an extraordinary person regardless of whether or not you were even a Christian. And that's the problem.

I know and I suspect that you know atheists and agnostics, flat-out pagans who often seem to have more of what certainly appears to be the fruit of the Spirit than people that I've known as Christians for years and years. You see, we have a hard time differentiating

between the fruits of the Spirit and the ordinary earthbound fruits that go by the very same name. And we wonder is there a difference between the fruit of the Holy Spirit or simple human virtue? The answer is yes.

See, the fruit of the Holy Spirit stems not from me but from the Holy Spirit. It's a reflection of the grace of God borne by the Holy Spirit flowing through the vine, which is Christ, into the branches, which is us. And as opposed to simple human virtue, it always points back to God. See, fruit bearing is not something that you do in order to become a better Christian. Instead it's something you automatically produce as a byproduct of the grace of God. We can't decide we're going to grow fruit to become Christians any more than a male deer can decide to grow antlers in order to become a buck. You see, antlers are a sign of something, not a requirement; and the fruit of the spirit is a sign of something, not a requirement. It's because we're a living part of the vine and because of that, that fruit grows on us.

As the elders begin to pass out the cup, we want to ask our self a question, very important question: How does this happen? How do we grow the fruit of the Spirit? How do we produce fig trees that actually have figs on them? Well, the answer may appear to be counterintuitive. You see, you don't grow patience by studying

about patience. You don't grow more peaceful by studying more peace. You don't grow more gentle by studying about gentleness. You grow each of these fruits and the other six by abiding with the One who created the fruits.

Listen to what Jesus said in *John 15*. He says: *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* There's the key. *"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."*

I mean, there's one word that occurs seven times in that paragraph and it's the key to producing fruit. It's that word "abide." It means to stay in a given place, state, relation or expectancy to continue, dwell, endure, be present, remain, stand, tarry. My 21st century definition of abide is "to hang out with." I've said it many times, what Christ is saying here is simply the more you hang out with Me, the more like Me you will become. We actually have

proof of that in the book of Acts.

Peter and John were not exactly considered to be refined literary gentlemen, in fact they were rough and tumble fishermen when Jesus called them into discipleship, but three years of abiding in Christ had produced an astonishing change in them, and it was a change that was noticed even by their enemies. *Acts 4:13*, it says: *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*

So here's the big question that I want to ask this morning. It's a tough question. The question is: Would the people you know ever say how astonished they are at you? Would they ever say or maybe even just think that it's because you have been with Jesus? What if I told you that God is determined to produce fruitfulness in your life and he's quite willing to discipline you, to prune you in order to produce it; would you be okay with that?

You see, we really do have a choice in this if you want to look at yourself as that fig tree. You can work to put all of your energy into producing bright, shiny leaves that may make you look exceptional on the outside but actually fruitless on the inside, or you can put your energy into abiding in Christ so that you can

spend the rest of your life being fruitful. So take a moment this morning to ask God to cultivate, to grow and to prune your love for Christ.

1 Corinthians says: *In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."* So take and drink.

This is the part that we call heart, hands and feet where we try to come up with some kind of practical way of understanding what it means to remember Christ. And so the first question that we raised here is, okay, how do you grow fruit? Okay, you grow fruit by abiding. Okay. How do you abide? Well, the first thing I would like us to ask ourselves this morning or I'd like to just talk about this morning is about something every one of us has probably in our pocket or pocketbook. You see, every one of us carries a computer now that's more sophisticated than the one that put the men on the moon. We carry it in our pocket. And through that computer we have access to virtually -- not every last bit but virtually all the knowledge there is in the entire world. And much of it is bad, a lot of it is awful, but a lot of it is glorious.

You know, if you can't read your Bible, you can set your smartphone

up to read it to you. I mean, you can look at what it has there and you can find the basic gospel, you can find evangelism, apologetics, you can find testimonies. Yesterday I was listening to a podcast about archaeological finds about the Moabites that have to do with proof of the legitimacy and the reality of scripture itself. There is so much in your smartphone that can help you abide in Christ. So much that help you -- can help you learn to grow more about the loveliness of Christ but you have to access it.

You know, we used to say years and years ago that one of the ways that you can really tell if somebody's a genuine Christian is look at his checkbook and that will tell you really where he's at. I think one of the ways you can really tell if a person is really trying to abide in Christ is look at his or her smartphone. What does it say about what you really want to grow in?

And so I would encourage you today, just take a small step, there are -- ask me, I've got all kind of -- I listen to all kinds of podcasts and they're just marvelous, amazing ways to grow. If you need some advice, I'll be happy to give it, but there's so much there for you. In fact, if you need some advice -- there's also some ones that are dangerous, there's cults out there and there's all kinds of people that want to fake it. So make sure that you

get the right ones. But ask yourself, am I using my smartphone in a smart way today? Let's pray.

Father, we just thank you for who you are, we thank you for this task that you have set apart. You have planted us on this planet, you are growing us right now, you are cultivating us, and you are pruning us for the purpose of bearing fruits to bring glory to your Father. Father, I just pray that you would give us the ability to recognize that, to pursue that, to have as our greatest desire the ability to look back at our lives and see fruitfulness and not just empty leaves. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.