

The Branch Life #3  
Refocus 2018  
Being Honest With Yourself

If you are new to Highlands, or even new to church going, I want to welcome you and give you a heads up that today is a bit different from normal because we're going to begin a short series on Refocusing our Vision on why we are here.

If you're new, you'll get a behind the scenes perspective of what we are about.

You heard it during the earlier welcome – “We are a community of believers who seek to meet people where they are and help them in their journey of becoming maturing and equipped followers of Jesus.

Each year at the start of the new “ministry year” I like to revisit some aspect of that Vision. This year, our ReFocus is centered on the passage from John 15 where Jesus gives a series of truths about the Branch Life. That term refers to our relationship with Jesus as described in John 15. We looked at it last week, but we'll pick up this week. As a reminder to those new or were out last week, in v. 5 Jesus says,

**5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.**

We're going to look at the fuller context in a few minutes, but first, I want to explore the question, “Do I really WANT to change?”

Growth as a branch involves change. Just watch any plant as it grows, or as it dies, and you'll see gradual change. If we are the BRANCHES abiding in Christ, then we'll change. Do we want that to happen, REALLY?

Scripture and life experience show some key realities of spiritual growth:

1. We all have a part to play – We are the branches
2. There is an enemy who is against us – Wormwood and Screwtape are real
3. Growth happens in community not in isolation- There is one TRUE VINE, but many branches.

We are more like corn than tomatoes. How so??

You can have a single tomato plant grow and bear fruit, but corn must be grown in a field of corn.

EX: RTS – student gardens. Someone tried to grow a row of corn; it didn't work. Part of the process is the cross pollination that takes place. So, the next year they planted a small field of corn and all the gardening families got to have some. It was delicious.

As believers, we are like corn. We need the cross pollination to take place in our lives and relationships, if we are going to be healthy and fruitful.

**1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.**

**7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. 9 Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love.**

**10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may**

be made full. 12"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

14 You are My friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.

16 You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. 17 This I command you, that you love one another.

Jesus wants us to know that He is the Vine and we are called to LIVE THE BRANCH LIFE.

That means

1. We bear fruit, or we are taken away, gathered, dried and cast into fire.
2. All that Jesus has is available to us if we ABIDE in Him
3. We are totally dependent on Jesus for growth
4. Fruit bearing involves a synergy between the Vine, the vinedresser, and the branches
5. The Glory of God is at stake – no small matter.

What is involved in THE BRANCH LIFE if we are to be maturing and equipped followers of Jesus?

John 15 calls us to examine ourselves and our Direction and decisions i.e. engage in fruit inspection. We need to be aware if we are or are not bearing fruit. Fruit bearing is connected to ABIDING, which brings about change. Being with Jesus, abiding in Jesus, staying connected to Him will result in change. But it is not automatic. Last week we saw that Sheilaism can hinder our growth (listen online or the APP).

Jesus points out the dangerous state of those who don't bear fruit. He doesn't go into why they end in that condition. Two other parables give possible insight:

PARABLE OF TWO BUILDERS – one built on sand and one on rock. He commends the one who builds on the rock. The difference is that they both hear the words of Jesus, but only one "acts upon them." He builds on the rock. The other builds on the sand and when the rains came down and the floods came up, which house remained???

PARABLE OF FOUR SOILS: One soil has the seed eaten by birds; one soil is rocky and what springs up doesn't last long because of affliction or persecution; one soil is thorny, and the cares of the world and deceitfulness of riches choke the seed. ONE SOIL is good soil and it produces a fruitful crop.

Those parables and the text of John 15 beg a question, "How do we become fruitful or stable in the face of what life throws at us?" It has to do with Abiding, i.e. hearing and applying the Word as it abides in us.

If we want to grow there are some truths we must consider:

We can't really blame our lack of abiding on anyone else (or our Enneagram or Myers Briggs type): "Things just haven't gone my way"; "I just don't know what God is doing"; "People in church have let me down too many times." ; "I though God was going to make my dreams come true", etc.

Here's the bad news reality for me and you: I have been a part of every bad decision that I have made or direction that I've taken.

Financial, relational, parenting, professional, dietary etc. I'm the one who talked myself out of exercising and talked myself into having that extra piece of cake or handful of potato chips at 10pm, and yes it's embarrassing, but I can share it with you because you have participated in every bad decision that you have ever made. We're all in this together.

We are the Masterminds behind many of our greatest regrets. We have seen the enemy and it is the man, woman, or child looking back at us in the mirror.

We all face our greatest challenge every morning in the mirror. It's not your boss or lack of a boss. It's not your spouse or lack of a spouse. It's not your kids or lack of kids. It's not your parents or your lack of good parenting. It's not the Democrats or the Republicans or the Libertarians or the politically apathetic or religious fundamentalist or religious liberals or that group over there. It's you, it's me, it's the one we see in the mirror.

My greatest challenge isn't my money or lack of it, my health or lack of it, my job or lack of it; it is me and I think I can say this honestly about all of us and that is that we are hard to lead. We should know this because we attempted every day and on many of those days we end up disappointed with how well we have followed. This goes back to sheilaism that we discussed last week and if you missed that sermon get it online or the app.

In our current cultural moment it seems that the national pastime is that of criticizing politicians, particularly those of the party that we don't like. But if we're honest we would have to admit that we individually have had a greater negative impact on our own lives than any politician ever elected, whether it's locally, Statewide, or nationally.

If we are going to grow in our journey as maturing and equip followers of Jesus we have to be honest about our situation. In John 15 verses 1 & 2 Jesus shows part of the end game and we need to work back from there. If we start with the end in mind, it will help us understand where we are and the direction we are heading in our journey.

Part of being a maturing and equipped follower or disciple of Jesus is knowing that we are called to impact the lives of others. Jesus told us to go and make disciples. That looks differently in our lives but there are certain key ingredients that go along with that. One of those relates to abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit. The reality is that we will all impact others. I heard a quote on the Bible podcast Bible in one year in which they made the point that if you think your life is small and doesn't impact people just consider the mosquito. As the African proverb puts it, 'If you think you're too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito.' The mosquito makes a difference in an annoying way, but the principle is the same

As followers of Jesus who also want to be fruit bearing and involved in the process of making disciples we need to learn how to follow well. Jesus has more to say about followership than leadership and he says some of it right in this passage and John 15.

Followership in the power of the holy spirit is essential for Earning and maintaining respect and Lasting influence. You may do a poor job of following Jesus and people may like you, but they will not want to BE LIKE you. We learned this early in life at home and in school and if you homeschool it could be a double whammy or a double blessing.

Followership is the key to sustain performance. This involves taking care of ourselves spiritually. We hear about missionaries on the field and why they leave the field that the number one reason is conflict with other missionaries. But at the root of that is a failure to take care of yourself spiritually and that is usually related to the issue of abiding. So it's true in our personal relationships in our marriages, and our families, at work, at church, and in spiritual leadership in the church.

The first step to spiritual drifting is that we stop abiding in Christ in some way, and that may come in small steps. But those are small steps in the wrong direction. Enough small steps in the wrong direction will get us far off the beaten path.

EX: when Dan went caving last Sunday he realized that it would have only been a few steps in the wrong direction that would have throwing them completely off. And even inexperienced caver can find themselves lost if they don't pay attention to the direction they're going.

In the Christian Life we have access to THE WAY and the TRUTH and WISDOM for living. Through the vine, Jesus, we have access to all of the resources available to us in Jesus. The question or the BIG IF for us is, "Will we abide? As Jesus says, "IF you abide in me...".

Three crucial decisions as we think about becoming maturing and equipped followers of Jesus. (Andy Stanley)

1. I will not lie to myself even if the truth makes me feel bad.

This entails a willingness to do an honest life assessment or fruit inspection. Psalm 139 verses 23 and 24. Did you know that there are worse things than feeling bad about yourself? That may sound like heresy in today's culture but it's true.

one thing that is worse than feeling bad about yourself is hanging on to what it is you feel bad about. Especially when there is the great possibility of seeing change.

As the Prophet Jeremiah explained in the context of the need for repentance, "the heart is deceitful Above All Things".

the easiest person for you to deceive is the person in the mirror. No one does a better job of selling you on bad ideas than you. one reason we may not know something is a bad idea is because we have ignored God's word and it has not informed our thinking and our hearts and our desires.

Effective growth in our lives requires brutal honesty with ourselves. We cannot grow spiritually, emotionally, relationally, unless we are honest with ourselves and most often we resist that, which is why we need close relationships in our lives. find someone who will tell you the truth or will enable you to tell yourself the truth.

We all have those situations and times in our lives where we stop and ask the question "why am I doing this?" "What is really going on in my heart and what am I seeking to gain out of this?"

It would be to our benefit to ask that question early on. it would be to our benefit to ask a prior question which is what is the wise thing for me to do in this situation. Given my past, given my current desires, given my future goals, what is the wise thing for me to do? If we ask that more often then we will eliminate the need to ask, "why did I do that?"

John 8:31-32 truth will set you free but lies will imprison you.

2. I will prioritize what I value most, with the end in mind, over what I want now.

This is living with the end in mind. If you've ever tried to lose weight, develop a consistent exercise routine, learn an instrument, a craft, a sport, an art, or memorize scripture, etc., you have learned this. ANYBODY EVER TAKE MUSIC lessons, and you can't play the instrument, but wish you could? I didn't prioritize the important with the end in mind.

This is an aspect of wisdom and it is part of dying to self as Christ talked about in terms of being his follower. One of the reasons why we want to give priority to Connection in circles rather than Rows is that others help us really understand what our deepest values are.

If you want to know your deepest values then try this at home: it is the eulogy exercise. Imagine that you are observing your own funeral. What do you want to have people say about you? The answer or answers you give point you to your ultimate values..

Note\*\* come back to this for CROSS GROUPS.

What we want at the moment is not always what we value most long-term. Scripture teaches us to keep an eternal perspective and to keep things in a proper relationship in terms of what we value.

The passage of John 15 verse 8 shows us something that is a Eternal value because it brings glory to God , and that is that we bear fruit.

Don't spend your life ignorant of what it is you really value because if you do you will never get what you really want. We have to take stock of our own hearts and lives to realize and appreciate what it is we really value in the long-term. And scripture helps us which is why we need to abide in Christ and have his word abide in us.

Healthy Growth takes place as we become aware of what it is we truly value and we move in the direction and take the steps necessary to see it come to fruition. Jesus lays out three values in this passage bearing fruit, having our joy made full and loving one another. How do we get there? By abiding in him..

If I am a follower of Jesus then I need to Value the things that he values most.

At the end of your life do you think you would be satisfied and fulfilled if your life were centered around bearing fruit for God Joy being made. And a life marked by love for others?

those are things that we would love to have people say about us and our funeral. Those are things that we have heard said about people at their funerals and we have stopped and asked ourselves are they talking about the same person that I know?

The value of a life is determined by how much of it is given away. We can't love one another in isolation. We can't give ourselves away to others in isolation.

### 3. I will not attempt to lead myself by myself.

Growth happens in community not in isolation. we need to do life with people that share our values not just our interests. You are going to do life with someone but you should make sure that it's with people who share your deepest values. Your greatest Joys and your greatest Sorrows have involved other people and doing things with other people. But typically our greatest regrets are things we do with other people who only share and interest but not our values. Or they may say they share our values but that is not backed up by their lifestyle and choices. we need to do life with people who are willing to help us see the truth about ourselves. When we push back to feedback we are pushing away the better version of ourselves.- Adam Johnson the pastor of Browns Bridge Church. Nobody loves feedback but we need it from people who share our values and who are moving in the same direction as we are. City in Rose is fine but it really won't cost us anything or require anything in terms of love. That's why we are committed to creating structures where we have circles instead of rows. When we are doing life with people moving in our same direction it is amazing what we see God do.

Parents, I may be speaking to the choir but if you don't have your children in the children's environments at an early age then they're going to miss out on a place where they can be with kids and adults who will help them move in the right direction. You will face a day at some point with your kids where you will wish they had another adult voice saying to them the same things that you are saying. And we are here to partner with parents not work against them.

every morning in the mirror you see someone who needs to know the truth, who needs to live a life prioritized by values and not immediate desires and someone who needs Community with others who are also created in the image of God.

Part of the structure of our cross group that will be started in September during Sunday School is built on the recognition that we all struggle to lead ourselves or to grow by ourselves. They are designed for here mentoring. That means that there's not a leader who is going to pour out Pearls of Wisdom each week unless he or she is reading scripture but that as a group there will be a dynamic of speaking to one another and learning to hear from others.

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FOR AUGUST 26<sup>TH</sup>

BARNA SURVEY

How are we doing as a whole in our American church culture? According to the Barna group's 2018 State of the Bible Survey, here is what we can learn: Do we recognize ourselves in these result?

<https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2018-seven-top-findings/>

### **Half of Americans Are Bible Users**

Overall, about half of Americans are "Bible users"—that is, they engage with the Bible on their own by using, listening to, watching, praying or using Bible text or content in any format (not including use at a church service) at least three to four times a year (48%).

I think it is safe to say that the bar is set pretty low if "Bible User" means to engage with the Bible, outside of church, 3-4 times a YEAR.

To be fair, Jesus does not specify what abiding looks like, but he does indicate that it involves an engagement with His Word. To be fair, the metaphor would indicate that a branch that is abiding in a vine is engaged with the vine more than 3-4 times a year.

Ex: your workplace or school. If you only show up 3-4 times a year, what happens?

EX: GNTC ATHLETIC ORIENTATION 8/7/18- if you don't come to class the first week, you will be dropped, and you may not be eligible to compete.

Two other results from the survey show the great benefit from engaging with the Word:

### **People Think that Reading the Bible Positively Impacts Spiritual Growth**

More than half of monthly Bible users report that reading the Bible has resulted in a perceived willingness to engage in their faith more (56%) and to show more loving behavior toward others (54%). More than half of Bible users (57%) contend that when they use the Bible, they have a greater awareness of how much they need God all of the time.

There seems to be a correlation between more regular bible use (Monthly) and faith engagement, love for others, generosity, and an awareness of their need for God. That is called FRUIT and this echoes what Jesus says about abiding and bearing fruit and "apart from me you can do nothing."

**THE MORE YOU KNOW THE WORD, THE MORE YOU ARE AWARE OF YOUR NEED FOR Jesus.**

**Six in 10 Americans Believe the Bible Has Transformed Their Life**

Overall, almost six in 10 U.S. adults (58%) believe that the message of the Bible has transformed their life, including three in 10 (28%) who agree strongly with this statement.

Again, we see the benefit of the Word – it is instrumental for life change. Jesus didn't come to simply make us better, more moral, more acceptable, etc. He came to make us NEW.

In John 17 Jesus prays for his followers and says, "Sanctify them in the Truth; thy Word is truth."

Jesus indicates that something could interfere because he says, "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you." There are things that happen that hinder us from abiding.

**THE BRANCH LIFE is about hearing and obeying the Word of Christ so that we Abide in His Love.**

**ABIDE is used 10x in 10 verses.**

We won't end up there by accident or by a whim, and it rarely happens in isolation. Abiding in Christ is a group activity. We want to help by providing some structure for connecting in community:

1: Community groups – 10-14 folks – mixed ages and stages in life. They will kick off August 19. Take a few weeks and visit around and then see which group, if any, you want to commit to. These groups are the first line of shepherding and care giving at Highlands. If you choose not to be in a group, then you are taking a step away from the care giving ministry of the church.

2. C.R.O.S.S. Groups – Beginning Sept 16<sup>th</sup> during Sunday school. They will last for 11 weeks. They are for relational transformation, not information. They are 3-5 men with me or women with women. There's no homework per se, but these groups are designed to promote more connection, growth, and accountability. I like to think of them as a BRANCH LIFE HOTHOUSE. Join us in SS today and you can indicate your interest in being a part of a group.

Andrew Murray – the true vine p. 199ff

BE A BRANCH, and be content as a Branch

There is a dignity to being a branch when Jesus is the Vine.

THOUGHTS ON JOHN 15

v. 1-2 JESUS PREDICTS OUR DESTINY, but we control it.  
Stanley Aug 12th

V. 7 – Jesus sized request

One aspect that proves we are Disciples of Jesus is that we are bearing fruit and the connection of versus 8 and 7 would be that fruit is something that we are asking Jesus for that can only be done by the power of Jesus. Verse 5 he tells us that apart from him we can do nothing. But with him we can do and ask whatever we wish. That is

we can ask and do things that are Faith sized that are Jesus sized. It's like going to spiritual McDonald's and asking God for something and God saying do you want to Jesus size this prayer request.

A fruitful disciple is one who is saying yes I want to Jesus size this.

All analogies fall apart but for our purposes In this passage in this analogy I guess we could say that those who become dead unfruitful branches are the ones who simply say no I'll just take the small size. Because the small size is something that we figure we can do ourselves on our own power. But Jesus wants us trusting in Him so that we are asking for things that can only be done in his power. So what would that look like in our relationship with God in our marriages in our church life in our families in our work relationships Etc in our giving life in our service and in our stewardship of our time talent and treasure.

After the verses from 11 to 15 talking about love one another lay down your life for your friends Jesus comes back to the idea of bearing fruit and just says very clearly you did not choose me I chose you and appointed you the you should go and bear fruit that your fruit should remain whatever you ask him to the father in my name he may give to you. And in that context is love one another.

Here are some sort of random thoughts from this passage of John 15 first Jesus is really making the point here that he is The Vine.

Call me or Jesus Captain Obvious, but there is a clear connection between bearing fruit and abiding in Jesus. It's as if you can make a direct correlation. It would mean that if you are not bearing fruit you must not be abiding. And if you are abiding in Jesus, then you will bear fruit.

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I did a whole series on one anothering and one thing that is clear is that we cannot love one another unless we are engaged and involved with one another at a level that goes beyond Sunday morning worship. We don't love in Rows

Jesus is not leaving us on our own because it's clear he is with us and is available to us and encourages us to take advantage of that connection through abiding.

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Habig on friendship from Proverbs

Scripture and life experience show some key realities of spiritual growth:

1. We all have a part to play – We are the branches
2. There is an enemy who is against us – Wormwood and Screwtape are real
3. Growth happens in community not in isolation- There is one TRUE VINE, but many branches. Have you ever seen one grape growing by itself?

ABIDE, BEAR, AND FRUIT ARE THREE KEY WORDS IN THIS PASSAGE.

John 15

Vine 3x

Bear / bring forth 7x

Fruit 10x (in NT contrasted with thorns, bramble, what is corrupt,. etc to be cut down or burned). Fruit of seeds, vineyard, Holy Spirit , fruit of righteousness; fruit of conversion; fruit of lips-thanksgiving  
Abide / continue/ dwell/ endure 12x

**FRUIT** -In scripture "fruit" refers to several aspects of spirituality:

- Godly character- LPPKGFSGS ( FRUIT OF THE Holy Spirit.)
- Good works - Mat 7:16-17, Col 1:10
- Converts - Jn 4:36; Col 1:6
- Worship Heb 13:15
- Giving - 2 Cor 9:10

Jesus wants us to know that he is the Vine and we are called to LIVE THE BRANCH LIFE.

That means

6. We bear fruit, or we are taken away, gathered, dried and cast into fire.
7. All that Jesus has is available to us if we ABIDE in Him
8. We are totally dependent on Jesus for growth
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10. The Glory of God is at stake - no small matter.

Let's put all of this into our context and Values here at Highlands.

Growth in the Branch Life looks like walking the path of the six E's.

If you've been here a while, then you've heard me preach about the Six E's, or you've seen it in the New Member Class. I regret that I don't bring them up more often.

Here is what the Branch Life produces as the branches abide in Christ and relate biblically to one another and the world.

**EMBRACE - A Heart That Trusts And Treasures Christ John 15:10**

**EXALT - A Heart Response of Faith Toward God 15:7 - prayer is the chief expression of faith**

**EQUIP - Learning To Be A Disciple 15:5 A disciple is one who abides in Christ and bears fruit.**

**ENCOURAGE - Learning To Love Others And To Be A Part Of The Body Of Christ- 15:12**

**EXHIBIT - Life Changing Transformation Is Becoming Evident - 15:8 - the fruit is evident and glorifies God**

**EXPRESS - To Communicate The Reality Of Christ Through Word And Deed- 15:16**

God is interested in us bearing fruit. Any owner of a vineyard or a garden wants to see fruit

EX: Linda's garden

Fruit = Glory for God

We will bear some kind of fruit: for God or for self.

The one abiding in Christ will accept the pruning in order to bear more fruit for the glory of God.

Do we pray that way??? VOV the Deeps

All metaphors break down at some point so don't over state the issue, but the vinedresser prunes by cutting away at something in the branch, not something outside the branch.

God may prune away attitudes, agendas, idols, etc that we are using to draw our value and identify from.

Jesus glorify God by his obedience to the point of death and we glorify God through our obedience. There's the passage that Jesus says unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground it cannot and dies it cannot bear fruit so for us fruit bearing should entail dying to self in some way. So as we consider the branch life part of that is going to be dying to self. And here's what's counterintuitive is that we will know the joy of Jesus when that happens because Jesus New Joy when he obey the father even to the point of death. Scripture says that Jesus for the joy set before him endured the cross despising the shame. So we should not be surprised that there would be things in our lives that from the natural outside perspective would seem crazy and difficult and something even we are others might despise but in dying to self we would know the supernatural Joy of Jesus.

Jesus lived out of the deepest desires of his heart which was to glorify God through obeying the father SO2 we would live the branch life in the same way out of the deepest desires of the heart. And if we know Jesus and have the spirit working in our lives deep down our desire is to glorify God through obeying him. Even when that obedience is difficult or humbling.

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John 15 shows us that the nourishment of the vine flows into the branch when the branch is abiding when it is attached. We can pray for people that the power of Jesus would flow into their lives but if they are not abiding then it doesn't happen buy magic. It's not like The Illusionist on America's Got Talent OR Penn and Teller where somebody does some trick in the card that they have ends up in somebody's pocket on the third row of the audience. That is not how God operates he is telling us here how this whole deal functions and he is telling us that all that Jesus is bread light Shepherd resurrection and life the way and the truth the vine is available to us if we will abide in him. There is an action a behavior a habit a discipline whatever you want to call it on our part that is necessary. All analogies break down in this but it's like you've got to play to win.

There is SYNERGY in fruit bearing: We abide and pray; the Father Prunes and answers prayer – especially prayers related to bearing fruit of love and joy and the advance of the kingdom.

God doesn't just cause the sap the nurse went of the vine to flow into a branch when the branch is not remaining in the Vine and again all analogies breakdown but it's almost like there's a a shut off valve between the vine and the branch and abiding in Christ means we keep that valve open and it means that we walk in obedience to his commands. Because when we disobey what we know God is telling us particularly from the word then we are shutting off that valve.

one of the amazing things is how gracious God continues to be toward us when we violate his word and the principles that he has given us for how we are to grow and mature.

And God the vinedresser is not sitting back helpless and watching stuff happen. He's not like old Gus the security guard at the bank on Andy Griffith sort of mumbling and bumbling. No God the vinedresser is active and he brings out his divine Hatchet to cut away the dead branches and brings his pruning shears to prune the branches that are bearing fruit so that they may bear more fruit.

This image sort of rubs us the wrong way because it's as if Jesus is telling us to those who have much God will work so that they will have more. And those that have nothing or their produce no fruit they are going to be taken away.

The whole issue of is the unproductive branch lifted up so that it can bear fruit or is it chopped off in front of the fire raises all sorts of questions that this passage in it of itself simply doesn't address but what is clear is that God wants us as branches to not just bear fruit but to Bear more fruit.

In verse 7 Jesus does a parallel relationship between himself and the word. An earlier versus he says if you abide in me and I abide in you this is what happens but in v. 7 he says if you abide in me and my word abides in you.

#### WHAT IS THE THING THAT YOU KNOW NEEDS TO BE PRUNED?

You know it because you're afraid God is going to bring the pruning shears to it one day. You know it is there and it is hindering your walk with God, your relationships, it infects your mind, your thinking, your perspective on others, etc.

It may not be some red light district sin; it may seem harmless to others, but you know that it reflects your own stubborn self willed approach to life.

It may be a respectable sin or an understandable attitude or stance on something. Friends will support you in it. They'll tell you that you have a right to feel this way, but deep down you know that it is THE true battleground of your soul in terms of yielding to God.

It may be something or someone you are seeking, or it may be some area of obedience where you are saying, "No, God, I'm drawing the line right here. You have no right to expect that of me. Lord if there is anything else I'll do it, but not this."

Sound familiar?

Christ the vine points us to God the gardener and is he trusted God so we too should trust God that he will do in us and for us what we need tat we might be fruitful. This raises the reality of how the gardener Works. He works by pruning and in some cases tearing away and throwing Into the Fire. If we feel like our lives are being pruned and innocence torn apart then perhaps we need to stop and ask God if he is pruning us and how do we need to respond.

The Christians first response to trial difficulty or whatever should be that of seeing it is pruning from the hands of a wise Gardener rather than ascribing bad motives to God.

EX: I think about the rose bush at our house in Palaiseau when The Neighbor first pruned it.

The sole purpose of the branch is to bear fruit. If not bearing fruit then it is taken away

Ex: pecan tree out front

The word abide is used 11 times in 16 verses of chapter 15. In verse 10 he tells us how to abide in his love and that is to keep his Commandments.

We are to remain in his love and we do so as we obey his commands.

Bearing fruit should be the natural outgrowth of abiding in Christ.

This fruit should be seen as fruit of the spirit definitely and there's also a fruit of witness that could be part of this.

Don't overlook the goal of JOY-

#### A FRUITFUL BRANCH LIFE

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1 -Steps of faith are how growth happens- my wish for you and for me is that our Christian lives are engaging. Branches die and become unfruitful when they get comfortable and stay in their comfort zone.

It can happen too easily in the American church. We can take things for granted and we assume that we are growing because we are busy. But it may not be a business that leads to fruit.

Fruit is seen out at the end of the branch, so to grow we need to get out on a limb in a spiritual sense. This means stepping out in an area of obedience where the outcome is not guaranteed, but you sense the nudging of the Holy Spirit to move out – Heb 11:6  
You find yourself in where you can't touch the bottom, i.e. it's deep.  
It will drive you to pray and draw close to God.

In what area? Where you have a pervasive sense of "oughtness". You find yourself thinking or saying, "Somebody ought to do something about that."

Ex: Mentoring

Ex: MTW missionaries I meet every fall at LiG- many are not "ordained" pastors, but regular folks who have a sense of oughtness about some ministry in some country overseas.

Relationship with God  
"spiritual life"- Abiding

Relationship with Others  
In the Church – growth in transformation connection in the body of Highland.  
Change happens in community, not isolation.

Family,  
work,  
fun,  
mission

-Be a part of someone's testimony to faith and engagement with God's people.

-Financial life – Give, save, live

## ROOTS, BRANCHES, FRUIT

One way to apply John 15 is to understand the Branch Life and to become a fruit inspector. The fruit inspection begins by looking at ourselves, but here's where it gets tricky, it also means that we get close enough to others, so they can see things we don't see. They can ask questions that we may not ask.

But what I want to do do in week 1 is focus on the first big wish from a pastor's perspective and from that of Jesus is that we would live the branch life.

This will entail some exegesis and application of John 15 and introduce some concepts of self-examination and community Connection as in what we will be exploring in Sunday School. And this maybe the big face step for some people.

And shape it around the context of being a maturing and equip follower of Jesus and abiding in Christ. The theme of living the branch life. I also want to look at these things from the rubric of the check six questions or the 6E values of Highlands. And one of those values will relate to taking a step of faith in our lives.

I want to review the big vision of disciple-making and the values of the six E's so rather than the check six questions I might use the 6-E's and terms of what I wish for each of us in that context and how abiding in Christ as a branch is crucial. And either this week or next week talk about the project for adult Sunday school beginning September 16th.

Check #1: What encouragements or successes have you had this past week?  
Check #2: What Biblical insight or verse from your quiet time has stood out recently? (For the duration of the C.R.O.S.S. group I'll provide some optional passages or readings for individual devotions. This would be a good time to promote scripture memorization/meditation)  
Check #3: What has been the most difficult part of your calling at home lately?  
Check #4: Personal Accountability: Choose what you want us to ask you about.  
Check #5: What non-believers are you building relationships with and how can I pray for your strategy to share Christ with them?  
Check #6: What spiritual battles can I help you fight through my prayer for you?

- I have a credible profession of faith
- I **enjoy** a regular practice of scripture reading/memorization and private prayer
- I have a lifestyle that reflects growth in repentance, humility, joy and thanksgiving
- I say yes to some things out of love for Christ
- I say no to some things out of love for Christ.

**EXALT – A Heart Response of Faith Toward God Luke 17:15**

- I engage my head and my heart in regular corporate worship
- I have a personal life characterized by a practice of the presence of God - gratitude, thanksgiving, contentment, and humility
- I seek to live in a way that points others to Christ, not to me
- I live in a way that indicates that Christ is my treasure, not the praise of men and the accumulation of things.
- I feel secure that God is in control of my life and the world
- I am not ashamed for others to know that I worship God.

**EQUIP – Learning To Be A Disciple Lk 11:1-4; Heb 3:12-14; Col 4:1 4**

- I regularly preach the gospel to myself and us it in my own life
- I know that God loves me, and this gives me joy, energy, confidence, & security.
- I am seeing growth in struggles with temptation through faith in Christ.
  
- I'm also becoming more aware of sinful attitudes, thoughts and behaviors in my heart and life.
  
- I'm believing that God is at work in my worst moments as well as in my best moments.
- I have a growing sense of walking in the Spirit and seeing the fruit of the Spirit in my life.
- I can find my way around the Bible.
- I can explain to someone else the main points of Christianity.
- I can explain to someone else the biblical distinctives of my church
- I could defend my beliefs if challenged by a non-Christian.
- I consciously walk by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit

**ENCOURAGE – Learning To Love Others And To Be A Part Of The Body Of Christ- 1 John 5:1-5**

I am growing in my faithfulness to what the Bible teaches about family relationships with my spouse, children, and parents

- (if married) I am loving and serving my spouse as God directs.
- (if a parent) I am leading and loving my children as God directs.
- (if single) I am content with God's plan for me and am building relationship with others in the body of Christ.
- I am honoring my parents.
- I am pursuing Biblical principles of sexual purity
- I am faithful to my church membership vows.
- I'm more willing to risk getting close to others by building authentic relationships.
- I'm regularly involved with a small group of believers who are getting to know me and who could fairly fill out this assessment on me.
- I pray for and with others in the church on a regular basis
- I practice Priority Giving – I regularly give my "tithes" and offerings from the front end of my salary, not the back end.

**EXPRESS – To Communicate The Reality Of Christ Through Word And Deed- Col 4:4-6; 1 Pet 3:15**

- I know my spiritual gifts in ministry.
- I am engaged in ministry that utilizes my gifts
- I see my neighborhood and workplace as my mission field.
- I glorify God by working hard at whatever I do.
- Can I say (with Luther) that when I do my work (commercial, industrial, agricultural, corporate, household, education, etc.) that God is at work in the world through me?
- Do I treat with dignity the clients/customers/patients that I serve and see myself as God's servant to them?
- Do I see my work as a gift from God and a means of my growing in grace?
- I have taken steps to be equipped / prepared to make a defense for the hope I have in Christ.
  
- I am praying regularly for specific people to come to know Christ.
- I have unchurched friends that I am seeking to influence for Christ.

- I share the plan of salvation with lost people that I meet.

**EXHIBIT – Life Changing Transformation Is Becoming Evident - Gal 5:22**

- I am investing my time, talent, and treasure in a way that honors God and His eternal values.
- There is evidence that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is growing in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control
- I take the initiative to be reconciled in relationships.
- I realize that I have a continual need for a heart posture of repentance
- I'm less defensive than I used to be
- I'm more compassionate than I used to be
- I'm more forgiving than I used to be
- I don't boast or try to build my record before God and others as much as I used to.
- I'm more apt to see my sin in relationship to others and to seek forgiveness than I used to.
- If you tend to avoid conflict are you growing in gospel boldness?
- If you tend to enjoy conflict are you growing in gospel humility?
- I am less inclined to base my relationships on status and what will make me look good.
- I am more involved with loving and serving the poor and marginalized

Tape 239 – Dec 6  
I am the Vine  
John 15

Here at Christmas time we're doing a series on Jesus. What child is this? Who is this baby in the manger? It is best to listen to his own statements. We do so with the I AM passages. Today John 15:1-17

The gospel of John is the first thing you read in Greek because it is simple, yet so profound. It is a deep well and every verse could be a series of sermons. What is he talking about? Growth and fruit. In Christ there is potential for change. Fruit has to do with character – Gal 5:22-23 these are character issues. Jesus claims to be the key to all that. How does a person change? A bigot become loving? Worried become peaceful? Jesus is the key to that change.

Many books deal with change- either mechanical or morality or magical (tap into an inner power). The bible says change through Christ – not technique, morality or new age. You need a connection with Christ – a cosmic concrete person. Draw on him like a branch on a vine. What do we learn about it?

1. It is a fact – v 16 – chosen to bear fruit. Called to be conformed Rom 8. All the plans of Christ, all that he has done is for the purpose of fruit in our lives for his glory. He is engaged in the goal of making us people of his glory, his greatness. His life is hooked up to our lives.

Many of you have come to the church to find help over some bad habits, yet there are deep issue in your lives that grieve the heart of God and hurt those around you. You leave them undisturbed and don't think you can change. The eternal Christ is committed to our change. Are you living as if that is true. Are you as scared and as happy as you ought to be in the light of that? Give up your small ambitions for your own character. Be amazed at what God can do in you.

2. Organic nature of growth- Christ goes to obedience from abiding. Without the abiding we would be Christianity as mechanical and moral – rules to follow. << here is what you must do, go do it.>> NO. the truth is that we must be organically hooked into the life of Christ. Here is the thesis: Jesus promotes Organic change through a new internal dynamic, not mechanical compliance through external force. What?

EX: this hit me in my first pastorate in counseling with couples. Pick the husband or wife as the dumb one. Typically a spouse calls needing help because the other is ready to leave. They both come and the wife says, “he doesn't listen, he isn't sensitive, he orders me around, he isn't open....etc.” he becomes sorrowful and says, “of course I'll change”. For a while he does, then usually after a time he reverts to the old patterns because there is no longer a fear of her leaving. He was motivated by fear, not by an internal dynamic of change. It was mechanical.

Perhaps he'll stay changed, but become more and more grumpy and drives her away.

External force can create compliance without any real change of life. The main external forces are fear and pride/ “I can't live without her, what will I do if she leaves...” Does it sound like love? It is really fear. It can get you to tow the line.

The other force is pride – “I'll change because I don't want to be like those bad husbands out there. I'll show them. I'll be a great dad, and husband” it works externally, but there is no real change. When you change out of fear and pride you have a problem. What is it? The reason you had the problem is your fear and pride. If you use them to change things that are rooted in fear and pride you haven't really changed the heart. You've jury rigged the heart and it will fall apart one day.

EX: metal must be heated to forge. If you just try to bend it will break. Those who simply bend for a while will soon break.

Ex; a Christmas tree looks better decorated than at the lot. But wait five weeks and it will look dead. It is separated from the trunk

Jesus is after dynamic internal change, not external.

See the two branches in John 15. Both look connected, but only one is internally connected. One bears fruit and not the other. Many say they are “Christian” externally, but do they have the vital internal connection? If you have it, then fruit is inevitable.

Jesus promotes Organic change through a new internal dynamic, not mechanical compliance through external force.

Lets' push the point to Christians:

When you first get into the faith you move into mechanic compliance rather than internal change. This is done so without meaning to. You put the focus on serving and business rather than on friendship with Jesus. It is so easy to do. The new Christian embraces salvation by grace, but it is hard for the heart to really believe that, so we get busy trying to help others and to being good. In our hearts we want to show God and others that we were worthy of his salvation. You go to meetings and classes and learn a lot of things. Big sins are put aside. You say “surely God must love me if I'm doing all of this.” You're inferring the love of God instead of experiencing the love of God. You infer that he loves you because you're obeying, you're not drawing on his love. (don't expect to get this if it is the first time you're hearing it. All that I've learned has come through repetition.).

We infer God's love by thinking, "he loves me because I'm being a nice Christian person". He does love you, but you're inferring it.

There is a Christian version of the Christmas tree. You decorate yourself with service and work, but without drawing on the source you dry up. There is no real character change – not more loving, peaceful, humble, better at taking criticism, at overcoming habits. Very little fruit because you aren't drawing on Christ.

Not sure of your position? You often think, "if I become a Christian what will I have to give up?" this is typical. "what are the rules? No sex until married? Tithe?"

No one has a secret book that you must follow and then you're in. or you want to be a Christian, then we spring a bunch of things on you. "aha, too late now, you've already signed up." A reverse Faust – sell your soul to God and then find out how bad it will be? NO

These questions make Christianity harder and easier than it really is. Too hard – you think being a Christian is to clean up your life. No, does the branch gets the life of the vine because it is fruitful and worthy? "look at me, let me hook up because I'm fruitful" No. It gets fruitful because it is hooked up, it gets the life. The gospel is salvation by grace, and we can do nothing without Christ. Becoming a Christian isn't "look at me, I'm willing to change my life now God must accept me." No the only way is to know that you have nothing to offer, to be grafted in. Not, "I'll live a good life, but I can't live a good life, I haven't lived a good life. Accept me o God because of what Jesus has done."

You're also making Christianity too easy. Jesus saying, "all you have to do is give up your money or sex outside of marriage." Jesus is saying I want all of you. CS Lewis " the Christian way is harder and easier. Christ doesn't want or time or money he wants you. I have not come to torment your ordinary self, I've come to kill it. No halfway measure, hand over all and I'll give you a new self, myself. My life will become yours."

If I'm saved by grace we come into the vine and Jesus becomes our reason for doing everything. We must give up or lives and the right to call the shots. Asking for the rules means you have no idea what changes will be made and to begin to explain them makes you think this is all there is. It isn't about rules but about relationship. It isn't about do this or don't do that, it is about dying. You'll be asked for more than money or purity. But to make Jesus the reason you get out of bed, to make Jesus your vine.

What does it mean to be connected to him? The rest of the passage shows it. They are related. Go to any one to find the other three.

- 1 knife of the lord
- 2 joy of the lord
- 3 friendship of the lord
- 4 love of the lord--remain in my love

Start with #1 and you'll get to all the others – you won't grow without pruning.

When you see a pruned bush it looks like the plant has been attacked. You see beautiful spouts that you think shouldn't be taken off. It looks like a waste. But a skilled gardener works well. Not one thing is cut off that wouldn't be a loss to keep and a gain to lose. It must go for the plant to flourish. When Jesus says this about pruning, then we think it is a waste. We lose our dreams, our hopes, all the things the heart goes after. They are pruned and we don't understand. Listen to Jesus and see that god prunes for a reason.

"no reason this happens to me." We don't understand the father's work.

"Are you saying, God looks out and sends things into our lives to make us better people?"

Is there a moral value of suffering? Does it dehumanize ? the knife comes to every branch. If you're hooked into Jesus the same troubles won't make you hard, but soft, not stupid but wise, not mean and small, but great. If not hooked to the vine you're cut off.

Eden is how god created the world, we destroyed it. The world is broken, but in the vine the bad can turn us into something great.

What does it mean? How?

EX: two women with bad husband and fathers of their kids. Both struggled with bitterness. Both were told to forgive. The one who did forgive found growth- she became a beckon in the family. The one who didn't was cut off from husband and child – despairing. She loved her son, but he was her vine. She didn't just enjoy her son, he was her joy. He was her meaning and the way she knew her life would mean something. If he didn't love or respect her, her life was over. He had become the vine and couldn't forgive herself or anyone else.

The other knew she had to draw on her true joy. Her approval is in god, not family. She drew on the vine, she began to pray , not just get busy. She was transformed.

The other woman went to a therapist who said, “go get your own career” she realized it was just a transfer from one false vine to another.

The same knife that will cut off the one who doesn't find joy in Christ will cut back and prosper the one who does. Draw on him in prayer and the word, not for things but for HIM.

Through the knife you draw on the love , the friendship and the joy of the Lord.

Jesus was cut off so that we would only be cut back. Adam was thrown out of the garden and it was guarded by the sword, the temple was open only to the priest who made a sacrifice. The only way to get back is if somebody takes the knife – divine justice. We only get back because of his suffering. As the woman thought about what he did for her, she found power to forgive. That is drawing on him.

Lewis – don't be surprised by a rough time. God forces us to a higher level because we have potential in Christ. He is building a different house than what we were thinking of. He is building a palace for his dwelling in the Spirit.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/glorifying-god-by-bearing-fruit-in-union-with-christ>

**Habits of the Heart:  
Implications for Religion**

[http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures\\_5.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm)

Robert N. Bellah

This presentation is a good defense of what the authors of *Habits of the Heart* meant by "Sheilaism" against critics such as Wade Clark Roof in his *The Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (1999) and Amanda Porterfield in her *The Transformation of American Religion: the Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (2001). The discussion that follows the lecture is exemplary of what a good Question & Answer session with Robert Bellah can be. That such discussions are rarely recorded justifies the amount of space devoted to the lecture's subsequent exchanges. Sheryl Wiggins transcribed the lecture and questions & answers. Sam Porter tape-recorded and edited the lecture and discussion as well as wrote this annotation.

To get the conversation started this evening I thought I would talk a little bit about some of the findings of *Habits of the Heart*, about religion, and particularly about the tendency in America in the direction of religious privatism. Early in chapter nine, which is the chapter on religion in *Habits*, we describe someone whose real name we don't use but who has become sufficiently paradigmatic that as I go around the country I find people talking about this before I have a chance to say anything. We interviewed, in the research for *Habits of the Heart*, one young woman who has named her religion after herself.

Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as "Sheilaism." This suggests the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions, one for each of us. "I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. [Notice at once that in our culture any strong statement of belief seems to imply fanaticism so you have to offset that.] I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining what she calls "my own Sheilaism," she said: "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other." Like many others, Sheila would be willing to endorse few more specific points.

I am glad that Sheila does have at least a second point besides taking care of herself and loving others and I suspect that that is a remnant of something she learned somewhere else earlier on.

But the case of Sheila is not confined to people who haven't been to church in a long time. On the basis of our interviews, and a great deal of other data, I think we can say that many people sitting in the pews of Protestant and even Catholic churches are Sheilaists who feel that religion is essentially a private matter and that there is no particular constraint on them placed by the historic church, or even by the Bible and the tradition.

We quote in *Habits of the Heart* a recent Gallup poll, which indicated that 80 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues."

Now, again, that isn't the way it really happens. But just the notion that religious belief ought to be a purely internal thing, and then you go to the church or synagogue of your choice, shows how deeply ingrained a kind of religious privatism is, which turns the church into something like the Kiwanis Club or some other kind of voluntary association that you go to or not if you feel comfortable with it-but which has **no organic** claim upon you.

Now I would like to shift gears here and quote from the opening of a very interesting report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England on the problem of belief within the church that begins by referring to a play of Dorothy Sayers, which I think is raising the issue quite vividly.

This play of Dorothy Sayers was written in 1946 and concerns a pilot in the RAF who was killed and then returns to his native city of Litchfield in England, and finds himself welcomed by the town's people from the past centuries and required to stake his claim to citizenship. The town recorder says to the young man, "What matters here is not so much what you did as why you did it. Can you recite your creed?" And the airman says, "I believe in God." And then the chorus of town's people, picking him up and carrying him along, says, "The Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ," and then suddenly the airman breaks in and says, "No! No! No! What made me start off like that. I reacted automatically to the word creed. My *personal* creed is something totally different."

So here we have Sheila in England already in 1946.

And then the town recorder says to him,

“What is speaking in you is the voice of the city, the church and the household of Christ, your people and country from whom you derive. Did you think you were unbegotten, unfranchised, with no community and no past? Out of the darkness of your unconscious memory, the stones of the city are crying out, 'Go home.'”

Now America is not England and, in any case, though England still has an officially established church, it is probably almost as pluralistic as we are. And I only use that example to suggest the kind of radical tension between a conception of the church as a part of the common life, as there before we came, as it will be after we go, as partly constituting who we are-and not merely a flimsy, temporary structure that depends on our momentary and voluntary will for its existence at all. But the question remains, how do we, in a pluralist society, avoid the radical individualism expressed by Sheila and also by the young airman in the Dorothy Sayers play? That's not easy.

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