

The Gospel of John: The Branches and the Vine

Aaron Brockett | John 15:1-17

Okay, what is up Traders Point and how are we? I don't know about you but there has been an awful lot of basketball going on at my house. Some of you are clapping and some of you are heartbroken right now because your brackets have already been busted. I get that. I am here to pastor you today and help you through that.

Wednesday night I had a really touching moment. I kind of ducked my head into my son's room. He is 12 and he was at his desk with a laptop computer open to ESPN, his iPad open to highlights of basketball clips and games and he was writing stuff down on paper. I said, "Hey what are you doing?" He said, "I'm just doing a little bit of research before I fill out my bracket," and I shed a tear. It was just a really meaningful moment in my life as a dad. I felt like the Lion King holding up Simba. But hopefully your team is still in it and doing well.

If you are a guest with us, I want to welcome you. My name is Aaron and I am one of the pastors here on staff. I would love to get a chance to meet you sometime soon.

Before we jump in I just want to update you on a couple of things. First of all, around here we periodically hand you these yellow bags and we ask you to go fill them with groceries and bring them back. Then we deliver those to the Caring Center in Boone County to give to people who just need more to eat. A couple of weeks ago, you guys gave over 5,400 pounds of food. That is a lot of food and I want to thank you for that. We can clap for that and celebrate it.

I recently read about the Caring Center of Boone County. They said that there are about 2,500 hundred children in Boone County that they categorize as "food insecure". That is the category they put them in. When I heard that it just broke my heart. I thought, "That shouldn't even be a category." I think as a church we could serve to obliterate it. So I want to thank you for giving so generously to that.

One thing I also want you to know before we jump in is that Easter weekend is two short weekends away. We always make a big deal about Easter around here because Jesus defeated death. That means that you and I can defeat death as well. So it is a celebration event that is coming up here in a couple of weeks. I want you to know that weekend we are doing six services.

Friday April 3 at 5:00 in the afternoon is going to be our Good Friday service. If you've never been to a Good Friday service I want to encourage you to come this year. It is really more of a contemplative service built around the message of the cross. I always like to think that Easter isn't nearly as much of a celebration if you haven't had a chance to observe Good Friday.

So we'll have a message around the cross, we'll take communion together, and really tee up the celebration of the weekend. On Saturday we are going to have a 4:00 and a 6:00 service and on Sunday morning we are going to do an 8:00, 10:00, and a 12:00. So make note of those service times.

Here is what I want to ask you to do as a church family. I want to ask you to invite others. So as you leave today will you grab a stack of Easter invitation cards that are out in the lobby and just give those away to family, and friends, and neighbors, and co-workers? You probably already know this but Easter and Christmas are the two times of the year when it is culturally acceptable to invite people to church. The chances are that if you invite them they will come because of some sort of weird sense of obligation or guilt.

I don't care how you get them here, just invite them to come and they'll probably come to this. Take advantage of it. You've got the wind at your back on this one. So take the Easter invitations cards and give those away. Invite people to come.

The second thing I'd ask you to do is to consider serving that weekend. We typically have a little over 5,000 people who show up here every weekend between the three services. On Easter weekend it will be about double that so we need hundreds of volunteers, people to come and to serve.

Then I would ask you to have the mindset of the servant leader. I am speaking to those of you to whom Traders Point is already home. I want to ask you to come that day and to give up your seat for guests, to give up your parking spot for guests, to park as far away from the building as you can if you are physically able.

Don't come to one of the worship services that might be one of the fuller ones. Chances are our guests will either come to the 10:00 or the 12:00, so you could always come to the 8:00 on Sunday morning. I don't want to be the only one in here at 8:00—preaching. So do me a favor and come for that and let's just have the mindset of a servant that day.

I've been here almost eight years and every single year I have people come up to me and say, "Our first time at Traders Point was Easter weekend and we never left and we were deeply impacted." I trust that God is going to do something significant over that weekend. Together, collectively, we want to see the Spirit of God move.

I'm going to open up just a time of invitation that day and just ask people to come and be baptized that day. We've done that in the past. It's a powerful day to do it because no one is expecting to be baptized on Easter. I always love it when people show up in their really fancy Easter duds and they go home wet. It is awesome. So that is coming up here in a couple of weeks.

If you have a Bible go ahead and grab it and get to John 15. If you don't have a Bible with you I'll throw this passage up on the screen behind me. As you are turning there...my 12 year old son Connor, one of the things he loves to do, and if I'm honest I still kind of enjoy doing it myself, is he likes to run up an escalator that is going down.

The last time we did this (it wasn't that long ago) we were together, just the two of us, at Circle Center Mall. He says, "Hey dad, watch this!" and he starts running up an escalator that is going down. I started cheering him on. I am like, "Come on man, you can make it!" and he starts huffing and puffing and he is trying to get up. He gets about half way up and all of the sudden this lady appears out of nowhere. I don't know who she was or anything like that. I just like to call her Miss Hannigan. That is what she reminded me of. If you haven't seen Annie, google it.

So Miss Hannigan shows up and she scolds him. She tells him to cut it out and then she looks at me and she gives me this look like, "You are a poor excuse for a dad." Here is what you need to understand about where I am coming from. Those of you who are parents, you probably get this. My son is 12. I am running the math already and I know he is, maybe, in my house another six or seven years. Out of those six or seven years he is probably not going to want to be seen with his dad in public running up an escalator going down.

I am really cherishing all these moments. So I very kindly but very directly looked at Miss Hannigan and I told her to back off. I said, "I am more concerned about his safety than you are. You are too uptight." I don't think she was very appreciative of that. Now Miss Hannigan, if you are here I just want you to know I love you in the Lord and you are still a little too uptight.

But, now here is the thing I want you to do. If you have not run up a down escalator I highly recommend you do it sometime and, preferably, you should do it down at Circle Center Mall. See here is the thing. When you are running up a down escalator it takes twice as much effort. You are not going to get to the top if you just walk. If you stop, even for a second, you are going to lose ground.

Life is a lot like a down escalator. Would you agree with that? I talk to people all the time and they say, "Man I really could not wait to get back here today because, as soon as we left the service last weekend, immediately life began to throw up some resistance toward us."

Already, even now, some of you know that as soon as you walk out of these doors you are going to be facing some resistance this week in a relationship, in a project, just even within your own spirit. As you are trying to make progress in your walk with the Lord it is like an uphill climb. There are these moments when you feel like, "Am I making any progress at all? And I feel like if I even stop for a minute I am going to lose ground."

Isn't that true? Have you even noticed that it takes weeks and weeks and months and months to get your body into good physical shape but like a fraction of that time to fall out of shape? That is not fair. That is the fault of the down escalator. You could call it anything you want. You could call it the principle of decay, you could call it the principle of entropy, but it is this idea that if you just leave something alone, you don't even have to do anything destructive to it, it will begin to wear out.

Just don't work on it, don't pay attention to it, don't brush up on your Spanish, don't work on the relationship, and see what happens. Now in the First Century they didn't have escalators but they did have vineyards. That is the term; that is the analogy, the word picture that Jesus is going to use to describe a very similar thing.

So we've been working our way through John's gospel over the past several weeks together. We've been looking at this last, extensive conversation that Jesus has with His disciples, His close friends, these 12 men He has been investing Himself in for the last three years. What He is trying to do, He is trying to prepare them for His departure. He knows what they are going to experience. He is basically saying, "Here is how you are going to go the distance. Here is how your character is going to stay intact. Here is how you face life going up a down escalator. Stay connected to Me."

Let me read the passage. It is John 15:1-17. Let me read the entire passage then we will go through and break it down together. Jesus says, "I am the true Vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser." That is just a fancy word for gardener. "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. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

That is such encouragement right there. Verse 12, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

So what is Jesus saying in this passage? Well Jesus is saying several different things, really, underneath the umbrella of one major thing. Jesus knew that short stories, word pictures, and analogies can communicate big-time, eternal truths in ways that other forms of teaching simply fail to. So Jesus would oftentimes speak in parables and Jesus would oftentimes say, “Here is a word picture to try to help you to understand that.”

That is what He is doing here. He says, “I am like a Vine and you guys are like branches. If you take the branches collectively and put them together with the Vine, you could say you guys are a vineyard and God is the Gardener of the vineyard.”

Now I don’t know the first thing about vineyards. The one thing I do know about vineyards is that they don’t happen by accident. They don’t just show up. They don’t just take care of themselves. Lindsay and I lived in northern California for a few years, not far from the Napa Valley. I don’t know if any of you have ever driven through that beautiful valley but we would just get in the car and drive through there every now and then. We would look out of the window and we would just see these gorgeous vineyards growing over these rolling hills.

I never once looked out the window and said, “Huh, look at that vineyard that just popped up out of nowhere. Look at that vineyard that just sprung up.” There is no such thing as a wild vineyard. It takes great intentionality. It takes great care. You look at something like that and you know that there is somebody working like crazy to maintain it.

And Jesus says, “The inner man, the inner woman, the inner you doesn’t just happen by accident.” You can’t just cross your fingers and wish for it. It is this idea that a well ordered life begins from within and the fruit of that works its way out.

Jesus says, "It's like a down escalator. You don't need to get addicted to something. You don't need to break the law. You don't need to have an affair. You don't need to do anything externally sinful. Just stand there and you'll eventually lose ground. The weed will eventually come up. The principle of entropy will kick in."

Jesus says to us, "That it is the result of living in a fallen world that is resisting us, pushing against us." Every single person in here should know what I am talking about. It is like, "I thought I was doing so well and then I slipped, I fell." Climbing up a shear glass wall, it might take hours to go ten feet and seconds to drop 100 feet. That is just the way our character works.

So Jesus says to these disciples, "Listen, I want you to pay attention to who you are and who you are becoming." This is not like some sort of heavy crushing weight. This is not a long list of to do's of the things you need to do to be fruitful. He says, "As a branch, you can't possibly be fruitful on your own. The only way a branch can be fruitful is when it is connected to the Vine."

So maybe one of the clearest definitions of character that I've ever heard, and you've probably heard this at some point in your life too. This is probably not new, this is just good review. Character is who I am when nobody else is looking. That is the simplest description of what that is.

You and I get pretty good at image management. I'll let you see what I want you to see. I'll refrain from letting you see what I don't want you to see. We all do that to a certain extent. But your true character is when you know nobody else is looking. What do you do? What do you say? What do you think? What do you look at? How do you behave?

How honest am I really? How pure am I really? How hard-working am I really? How joyful am I really? That is our character and out of your character come these things that we call the *fruit of the Spirit* or the *fruit of behavior* of a well ordered life. It is something that we should all aspire to, not because by your well ordered life God will love you and accept you, but because in your well ordered life there is great joy.

Did you notice Jesus mentioned joy in the passage? That His desire for you is not to be servants: but friends. His desire for you is that your joy may be full and the way that your joy is full is when you eliminate the corruption of your character by staying connected to the Vine of Jesus Christ.

So here is the thing. Progress is a big, big deal in our culture. Have you noticed that? Businesses are trying to make progress in the bottom line. Tech companies are trying to make progress with the next new thing. All of us want to make progress financially, relationally, physically. We've all got these goals and those are all great and wonderful things.

Can I just get you to think about this for a minute? When was the last time you stopped and asked, "Am I making progress in my character?" How do I really even know that? How do I look at that objectively? That is what Jesus is getting at here. You see if we don't spend some time focusing upon what Jesus says about godly character and the fruit of the Spirit and how we yield that, what we will do is we will basically drift towards grading on a curve. We'll basically say, "Well here is how I know how good I am. Let me compare myself to those around me."

You see I did that growing up. I was a pretty good kid growing up. I went to church every week, not because I wanted to, but because my parents told me to. I didn't really smoke anything or drink

anything or have a season of my life where I was a prodigal for a time. Some of you can relate to that. Some of you would say, "Yeah, I was a pretty straight-laced kid. I didn't really do anything. I never really strayed too far."

Others of you in this room, you would say, "Actually there was a season in my life when I was in rebellion, when I was in denial, when it was pretty dark and it was painful." But here is the blessing in that. At least you knew something needed to change. For me I was just like, "I don't really sense a need for a Savior. I'm pretty good. I've not really done anything wrong. I've not been like him. I'm not like her." I was kind of grading on a curve. I thought I was good in God's eyes because of all these bad things I had never done.

Meanwhile I was standing on the down escalator and never really knowing it. Here is what I mean by that. Just because I had never done anything horribly wrong did not mean my character was becoming more Christ-like. It didn't mean that I was becoming more godly. It didn't mean I was yielding more fruit of the Spirit in my life. It certainly didn't mean my character was something to be admired or emulated.

So Jesus says to us, "Look, this is how My relationship with you works. I am not asking you to just say you believe in Me and I'm not asking you to set your life up with a set of Christian beliefs or to try to change your moral ethics. I am not asking you to do that only. Here is what I am asking you to do. I am asking you to see Me as a Vine and you are a branch. And a vine goes into the soil and the vine's job is to bring up nutrients to the branch. The branch cannot do it on its own. Your only task is to be connected to the Vine and to stay connected to that Vine."

You see Jesus doesn't just want to influence our character, Jesus wants to enter it and that is fundamentally different. You see a branch would never just say, "Well I am in close proximity to the vine." A branch would never say, "I am rubbing up against the vine." The branch, the only way it's going to get nutrients, the only way it is going to bear any kind of fruit at all, the only way it is going to experience any kind of change is when it gets connected to the vine.

Romans 6 says, "We are to be united with Christ." That's what it means to be a Christian. It's not about belief only. It's not about walking down an aisle. It's not about praying a prayer. It's not about getting wet in a baptism. It's about being united with Christ. "Therefore I no longer live but," what? "Christ lives in me." So union with Christ is the only basis for our growth. So the word *abide* is key.

The word *abide* is mentioned 40 times in John's gospel and here is what it means. It means to rest in. It means to persist. It means to depend upon. Jesus says to us, "Stay connected to the Vine; otherwise you won't go the distance. Life is like a down escalator. You can run up that thing all you want and still the principle of entropy will kick in and take you further and further away from the heart of God."

How many of you have ever known somebody in your life who, at one time, was tracking, he was a follower of Christ? Maybe he was even your mentor, your teacher, somebody you looked up to and now today he is no longer walking with Christ. He says he doesn't believe. He is walking far away. What happened?

Well it wasn't an event. It wasn't just a set of beliefs. It was a process. Somewhere along the line the branch got disconnected from the only source of nutrients and it eventually dried up. That is always what happens.

I was doing some research here a few weeks ago. There is a guy at Fuller Theological Seminary who spent 15 years researching this. What he wanted to know is how many people were named in the Bible. He went down the list and he asked, "How many of those named people were influential? Were they leaders in some capacity?" He came up with a list of 1,000 names. There are 1,000 names in the Bible of people who were influential leaders. They were close to God in some capacity. And he tried to trace everything we know about those named leaders throughout their lifetime.

Here is what he found. Thirty percent of them finished well. Seventy percent at some point derailed. They walked away from God. You have Judas who walked away and betrayed. You have those types of examples where their lives ended in some sort of a train wreck. What happened? Somewhere along the line the branch got disconnected from the Vine.

You see the goal for you and for me isn't that we would have some sort of emotional experience where we raised our hands, prayed a prayer, said we believed in God and now we are saved. The goal for us is continued connection so we can be faithful decade, after decade, after decade or for however long God grants us life.

So here is what I want to ask. How do we evaluate our connection to Christ? How do we do that? I want to give you three questions you can contemplate on your own. Next time you get together as a Life Group it would be great to just kind of center the conversation on these three questions. Three questions we can ask to evaluate our connection to Christ.

Here is the first one: Do I have a developing appetite for God's Word?

You notice in the passage that Jesus said, "Abide. Abide in My Word, keep My commands." He is basically saying, "Part of what it means to be connected to the Vine is to receive the nutrients of God's Word." In Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, "Man should not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the Lord." The psalmist says, "Your words are sweeter than a honeycomb."

So Jesus says, "Would you stay connected to My Word?" Here is the interesting thing. Instead of saying, "Are you developing an appetite for God's Word," I could have said, "Are you reading your Bible daily?" That sounds about as exciting as, "You should eat your asparagus."

That is usually what ends up happening. I don't think I have to convince most of us in this room that we should be spending time in God's Word. But in reality how many hours during the week are we really spending in God's Word? And for most of us, even including me, there are just those seasons where we are just like, "Man, I've gone the whole week and I've not spent any time opening God's Word. I've let too many things distract me. I've been reading other things. I've been paying attention to other stuff." That is life on the down escalator.

Now here is the fascinating thing I want you to know about the Scriptures. The Scriptures really are powerful. They are sharper than any double-edged sword. They penetrate. They change you, they really do. I believe that down to the core of my being. But here is the thing. Isn't it like there is this weird force field around your Bible that just keeps you from opening it up at times? You can think about all these other things you've got to do. It is amazing to me.

Do you know that the number one bestselling book (it has been like this for years) is the Bible? I went over to our Resource Center and I just wanted to know, "What is the number one selling resource?"

What book do we sell in our resource center more than any other?" Do you want to know what that is in our Resource Center? The Bible—by a mile. What is fascinating to me is you can walk 50 feet from the Resource Center to the Connection Central table and get a free one. You can download it for free. You can get access to it. But, it is still the number one selling book. There is something within us that is like, "You know what? I need to read this thing. I want to read this thing."

But, there is something keeping us back from it. Here is how I want you to think about the Bible. Think of it like food. If you just think about, "Well, I'll read the Bible because God wants me to," give it maybe a day or two and then you'll figure out excuses not to get to it." If you are like, "I should read the Bible to get some good information," then you start reading it like a textbook and there is no life in that. Or, "Let me just read the Bible for some inspiration. Let me go to the Bible when things have gone wrong in my life." That's not good either.

When my wife writes me a letter, when she sends me a card, I do not read her words like a textbook and I do not read her words simply just to try to find inspiration. I read her words because I want to know her. When you go to the Bible you are reading it to know God's words. That is the simple principle here.

Have you ever heard this? You are what you eat? It really is true, isn't it? Now this is not one of those sermons to tell you that you should stay away from movies, and music, and secular stuff. That is up to you. You have freedom in Christ to decide what you are going to do. But it is one to simply say this. What are you filling your mind and your heart with? Whatever you are filling your mind and your heart with will be an indicating factor of the fruit you produce.

So I was talking to a good friend of mine several months ago who really likes a certain genre of music and I said, "Hey man, I like that genre too. Who are you listening to?" And he told me who the artist was. I was like, "Man, I am not against that dude. I am actually praying for that guy. But I do know that the content you are talking about, just a steady diet of that bro, is not good for you. If you are expecting to make any advancement in your walk with Christ, in your purity, in the fruit of the Spirit, you can't do that. It's like a down escalator."

He is like, "Who should I listen to?" And I gave him the name of an artist and some of you may recognize him. I was like, "You know what? You should listen to Lecrae." Lecrae is a great rap artist, every bit of quality as anything you are going to find out there but he is solid theologically. He was like, "I don't know. I really like this other guy."

He is also kind of into fitness. I was like, "Dude do you eat Twinkies three meals a day?" He was like, "No way." I said, "That other guy is Twinkies for your soul." In the same conversation he was like, "How do I make advancements? How do I stay pure?" Well, if you are feeding yourself with stuff that's not good for you, you are not ever going to produce fruit.

Here is the thing. You may not feel like opening up God's Word. You may not think you understand it. You may think you are in a dry section of it. You need to think of it like a meal. You can read it and walk away and say, "I am not exactly sure. I didn't see the sky open up in that." You know what? God is fertilizing the soil of your heart with His Word and fruit will come. But you can't stop and start. You can't fast from it. Get in it.

Here is what I'd ask you to do. For those of you who have an electronic device, download youVersion on iTunes. They've got every Bible reading plan under the sun. Just commit to say, "I'm going to start in

some kind of Bible reading plan today.” Here is another thing. Start memorizing some Scripture, a verse a day, two verses a day, and start putting it into your mind and it won’t come back void.

Here is the second question: Am I bearing fruit in my character?

Whenever you go out and plant a tree or a garden you expect those things to be fruitful. You expect those things to bear fruit and if they don’t then you know that something is wrong. Jesus says, “Living things bear fruit,” and the kind of fruit He is talking about can be found in Galatians 5, the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Those are the things that Jesus says He wants to produce in and through our lives.

Now if you notice, the absence of those things always leads to pain. The absence of those things always leads to anguish and strife. So here is something I did last week. I just made a list of those things and I went down through it and I was like, “You know what? How am I doing in love? How am I doing in patience? How am I doing in self-control?”

I am a little biased. I am kind of my own fan. Should I have not said that out loud? So it is good that I ask my wife. It is good that I ask somebody who is really close to me, who I know loves me, who will tell me the truth. I’d encourage you to do the same. Sometimes we just have these blind spots and we just don’t see it.

So how are you doing in each of these fruits of the Spirit? Now here is the thing. This could be the part of the sermon where maybe you are uneasy and feel like I am pointing fingers at you and judging you. So let’s point the fingers at me. Let’s point the fingers at your pastor.

I went through the list last week and I just tried to do a gut check and I said, “You know what?” I don’t know if you know this about me. I’m not very good at handling criticism. I don’t handle it very well. I know I am probably about the only person in this room who struggles with that. If somebody criticizes me, I am really quick to defend. I am really quick to explain. I am really quick to say, “You don’t understand.” What is that? Well it is something in me where I am trying to justify myself. I want to please you too much. I want to be seen well in the eyes of men. And maybe what I need to hear is something God wants me to hear.

I know there are moments where I get impatient and I have a tendency to snap at my wife and my kids when we are running late. It is embarrassing when it’s on the way to church and I am preaching. I’ve gotten better in that but I’m still not there. I always have to ask myself when I get impatient, “What is that exactly?” Actually those moments would be great moments to demonstrate a tender hearted spirit, and demonstrate patience, and demonstrate grace. I’m just not there yet.

I know I could do a lot better job encouraging people. I don’t know about you but some of you are amazing encouragers. Every time I bump into you, you are encouraging. It is just like a gift that you have. I wish I had more of that. I’ve become aware of that. Every time I see people I have to remind myself to encourage them because every single person I’ve ever bumped into, I know they could use encouragement. Isn’t that true? That is just the one thing you cannot get enough of. We all could use it and sometimes it just goes over my head. That is directly related to the fruit of the Spirit.

I was with my son in Colorado a couple of weeks ago. I take him out there—we’ve done that the last three or four years, just a guy’s trip. I just want to try to hang with him and hopefully there will be some

conversations that will come up there that maybe wouldn't happen in the regular routine of our week. This trip I was so convicted. We were both skiing. As we were skiing down the mountain we stopped and this snowboarder comes flying over the hill and he kind of stops. He says, "Hey guys, you shouldn't be stopped there. I couldn't see you." I looked back at him and I said, "Okay slick, we'll get right on that."

My son was watching me. I am like, "Well anyway, so uh, son I know him. We are just kind of good buddies." So it was like, "Man Brockett you totally messed that up." Instead of teaching my son grace and compassion I just totally smarted off. Now he is a snowboarder so I don't know. He probably had it coming somewhere along the line.

What I am trying to say to you is I've not arrived. I am in process. I am struggling. I am on the down escalator with you. There is still more fruit that God wants to yield in my life. I'm under no illusion that God is prolonging my life so that I'll get wealthier, so that I'll get more secure, so that I'll accomplish these things. I'm eventually going to go into the ground. The reason that God is prolonging my life is because He wants to see more fruit. And He wants to see more fruit from you. Not because He would love you any more or love you any less, but for your joy.

Listen, when I snap at my wife and kids because we are running late, I'm not any more joyful. When I get defensive because somebody criticizes me, I'm not any more joyful. But when I can rise above those things and demonstrate fruit because of my connection to Jesus Christ, there is a strange joy that comes in that. I walk away full.

Here is the thing. A Christian is somebody who has put their faith in Jesus, not just as Savior, but as Lord. That is what that means. Lordship means connection. Basically I'm not trying to justify myself in the eyes of men. I'm not trying to justify myself in the eyes of God. God comes to us and He says, "Jesus is the only standard of righteousness. You'll never live up to that. But what I've done is Good News. I've taken Jesus' perfect record and transferred it to your account and so now you're fully accepted. You are adopted."

Here is another place in the Bible that talks about this. "You are grafted in. You are grafted into the Vine. And God does not love you any more when you perform well. He does not love you any less when you make a mistake and have a bad day. His love is fixed. So with that in mind I've got to say to myself, "Why am I so jealous? Why am I so angry? Why am I so selfish? Why am I so lonely? God has already given me these things in Christ."

Here is the third and the last question: Am I loving people the way that Jesus loves people?

Did you catch the very last verse in our passage, verse 17? Jesus basically gives this summary to everything He just said. He says, "These things I command you, so that you will love one another." That is kind of an interesting way to end that section of Scripture. He didn't say, "These things I command you so that you'll be a better person," or "so that you'll yield more fruit in your life." He says, "I've actually commanded you to do these things so that you will love one another."

Why is that such a big deal? Why is it that Jesus has come to us and said, "The greatest commandment is to love God and to love others."? That is the whole reason why we bear fruit. Jesus knows there are men and women who are far from Him who He desires to have a relationship with, to save by grace through faith. One of His primary vehicles for doing that is through the other branches. That you would go and

demonstrate the kind of love where people would sit up and take notice and say, “There is something different about you.”

Now would you not agree with me that loving people would be a whole lot easier if it wasn't for people? Isn't that true? I could really love that other person if it wasn't for that other person. People will let you down, people are messy, and people are broken. Here is one of the great tragedies just in the last 2,000 years of church history. The church, as a vineyard, a collection of branches, forgets that the only way we yield fruit is by staying connected to the Vine. When members of the church begin to think, “Look at me. Look at how I cleaned myself up,” and we start to look down our noses at others, that is when it spoils. That is when it turns sour.

The other stuff you can apply to yourself individually. I want to apply this last one to our church corporately, just to continue bringing us back to this heartbeat so that we would never miss it—this should be and is a place for messy, broken, imperfect people to come and to meet Jesus Christ and to hear and receive the message of His grace, not a place for Christians to come and pretend that everything is okay. Rather, we would come and know that this is an okay place. This should be a safe place for you to come just as you are.

We've talked about this before. Listen to me, especially if you are a guest here. You can track anything you want in behind you. We're not going to kick you out. This is a place where you should come and be received and be loved as you are. With that said, grace and truth have a tendency to be a teeter-totter and it's very difficult for us to kind of balance that thing out.

What we have a tendency to do is we either have a tendency to say, “I really want to be nice, and I really want to be loving, and I really want to be gracious so I never want to confront you with the truth.” Or we go the other way and we say, “No, no, no, we're all about the truth here,” so we communicate it in such a way that isn't very gracious, and isn't very loving, and isn't very compassionate. It actually sounds pretty judgmental and hypocritical.

So please remember this. Give me truth without grace and I can't hear you, but give me grace without truth and it won't change me. We need to be a church where we would say, “Listen, we're not going to compromise on the truth. This is the authoritative Word of God. We don't have any margin to flex on it, any margin to change it, any margin to say, “Well it was applicable then, but it's not applicable now or here is what it was really meant to say.” No, this is the living Word of God that is nourishment for our souls. But listen to me. You are loved and you are accepted. Come meet Jesus Christ.

Now here is the thing. I'll travel around at times and I'll visit churches and if a church loves Jesus and is teaching the Bible, I'm a fan of that church. Every time I go and I visit churches I am for them, but I can tell, almost as soon as I walk in if the congregational life of that church is connected to the Vine or not. You can sense it in the air.

Every now and then I'll talk to people who are visiting us and, if they are in Christ, they will say, “I can really sense the Spirit here.” If they are not yet a Christian they will say, “This place is really loving.” And they are really talking about the same thing. You see we need to be connected to the Vine, not just for our own individual happiness, but listen, look around. This is God's plan A, the vineyard, the church of Jesus Christ.

He is not just saying this that we would live happy and productive lives. He is saying this so we would ransom men and women away from hell and lead them to the gospel message of grace and truth. Every single week we can do this. Can I give you just one little tiny minor homework assignment? Every single weekend when you come here, and this is for those of you for whom this is already home, would you just make it a point to try to meet somebody you've never met? Just walk up and smile at them and say, "Hey, how are you doing? Is this your first time? Oh, you've been here 10 years? Oh no, let's go to lunch. Let me buy you lunch for that."

I know that one of the knocks of a big church is that it is big and maybe kind of impersonal and you don't know everybody. I can understand that and actually I don't really know what to do about all that. I would simply say this. You don't need to know everybody, just know somebody. Actually, when you make it your business to just know somebody, eventually you start to know almost everybody. Isn't that funny how that works? You begin to just go and you say, "Instead of just going to receive something and to be fed by someone, who can I pour into? Who can I invest in?" Jesus said to the disciples and He says to us, "Love one another. True friendship is that you lay down your lives for one another."

I've said this before. I want to be a part of a movement of God. I don't just want to do church. I don't just want to gather here every single weekend. I don't just want to grow a big church. Those of you who know me well know that, number one it is amazing that I am in ministry to begin with because I didn't expect to do that. My grandfather is a preacher. Every time I hear somebody say, "Reverend Brockett," I'm looking for him. And I never, ever thought we would be a big church. We never set out to be one. We just said, "Let's deliver fresh bread. Let's lead men and women to Jesus Christ."

Here is what happens. You go and you tell your hurting broken friends, "Would you come and see? Would you come and taste? Would you come and have an experience with Jesus Christ?" Jesus says, "If I be lifted up I'll draw people unto Myself." The goal is not to fill this building up. The goal is that we would gather to receive the nourishment of the Vine and then we would scatter.

Listen to me. This is not church. This is practice. This is the huddle. As soon as you leave here, that is when church begins. You are in church service Sunday afternoon or during whatever service you go to, if it is Saturday night or Sunday morning, and we huddle up together and we get ready, we receive the nutrients of the Vine, and then we go back out into the world to be the church, to influence others toward Jesus Christ.

So here is what I want to do in the remainder of our time. We are going to take communion together. I know this is the time in the service where the down escalator kicks in and you are like, "Quick get your things. Let's make a quick exit." I get that. I understand. Could I just ask you that if at all possible you wouldn't? Because this is not the end of the service, everything we've done up to this point is for this moment.

And I want the Spirit of God to fall freshly upon us wherever you are in your life. If you need to give your life to Jesus Christ, I want to encourage you to do that. I want to encourage you to take that step. If you are here and you are saying, "Aaron I am with you. I don't really know that I'm doing very well in the fruit of the Spirit. I've been kind of standing on the escalator and I think I'm losing altitude." It doesn't mean you have to do more. It means get connected to the Vine.

Here is the great news about this. I want you to hear this. When you get connected to the Vine fruit is inevitable. It is just inevitable. It's not going to be one of those things you are going to have to

manipulate. Jesus gives us this promise. "It is automatic, not because of what you've done, but because of what I am doing through you."

Let's pray.

Father we come to You right now and I just pray that in these next few moments that the Spirit of God would do some mending, do some breaking, do some convicting, do some challenging, do some encouraging so that we might be fruitful branches in Your Kingdom. God I want to be a part of a fruitful church, not for the fame of my name, not for the fame of Traders Point, not for the fame of saying, "Wow, look at what that church is doing," but for the fame of Your name.

So God I just pray that You would continue to prune us, that You would continue to keep us fresh so we might be fruitful for Your Kingdom. So that this would be a place that when people hear about this church they would know, "You know what? There is something so different about that place," and that they would experience transformation.

So God please use us, please work through us, please help us to stay connected to You in this world that is a down escalator, it keeps taking us away from You. And may we strive to be connected to Your Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.