

Branches and Bunches

John 15:1-17; Matthew 7:15-20; Galatians 5:16-26

1. Organic Spirituality—according to Jesus

Seed Thought: Jesus prescribes a spirituality available to any person (rich or poor, brilliant or simple, old or young ...) and applicable in any circumstance (calm or anxious, well or ill, fortunate or afflicted ...). Read *John 5:1-6* on page 2.

In his metaphor, what does it mean to have a thirst for the sap? What does this look like?

Why is reverence for other branches essential? How is this manifested?

When is one eager to see the Gardner coming? How do we acquire this expectation?

2. How does God participate in human development?

Seed Thought: The temptation to *source* our own spirituality is real. Those who take themselves too seriously are especially vulnerable. And those who misunderstand the “goal” of spirituality are also at risk. If you do not know his work, I want to introduce you to Oswald Chambers. He speaks to this issue well. See page 3.

What is the problem with self-sourced spirituality and religious perfectionism?

Can you see and respect the latent spirituality of those who do not practice your religion?

How is the fruit of the Spirit meant to change *you*?

Where do we find the courage to self-prune? When do we need to? How do we?

3. What kind of communities does the Spirit form?

Seed Thought: The teaching of Jesus features the necessity of community between those that are coming to know, love and serve God. Neglecting one's faith family is immature faith. The desire to guard the health of one's Christian community is evidence of the Spirit's active influence. Read *John 5:7-17* on page 2.

Why does being a grape require sharing growth shoulder to shoulder with other grapes?

How does health in any part of the whole improves the health of the whole?

When is life as a CO-OP vineyard enjoyable and productive?

4. Life passes through you

Seed Thought: It is astounding and humbling to see ourselves as God's delivery system. In addition to unending direct and indirect generosity, God's Spirit uses us to pass on his affection and affirmation, justice and kindness, integrity and health. And, our health is a precondition to passing health on. Read *Galatians 5:16-26* on page 2.

What is the relationship between self-care and self-sharing?

What does it mean to quench the Spirit; and how do you know when you are doing it?

What are the implications of "be what you prescribe and hope" in your life this year?

Own the Image: *1 for me, 1 for us, 1 for others*. What came to mind for you?

John 15:1-17

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have 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 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Galatians 5:16-26

¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Closer to the Fire: Images of a Vibrant Community

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Freedom from Christian Perfectionism

Oswald Chambers¹

Philippians 3:12-14 ^{NASB}

¹² Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³ Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

It is a trap to presume that God wants to make us perfect specimens of what He can do – God’s purpose is to make us one with Himself. The emphasis of holiness movements tends to be that God is producing specimens of holiness to put in His museum. If you accept this concept of person holiness, your life’s determined purpose will not be for God, but for what you call the evidence of God in your life.

How can we say, “It could never be God’s will for me to be sick”? If it was God’s will to bruise His own Son (Isaiah 53:10), why shouldn’t He bruise you? What shines forth and reveals God in your life is not your relative consistency to an idea of what a saint should be, but you’re genuine, living relationship with Jesus Christ, and your unrestrained devotion to Him whether you are well or sick.

Christian perfection is not, and never can be human perfection. Christian perfection is the perfection of a relationship with God that shows itself to be true even amid the seemingly unimportant aspects of human Life. When you obey the call of Jesus Christ, the first thing that hits you is the pointlessness of the things you have to do. The next thought that strikes you is that other people seem to be living perfectly consistent lives. Such lives may leave you with the idea that God is unnecessary – that through your own human effort and devotion you can attain God’s standard for your life. In a fallen world this can never be done.

I am called to live in such a perfect relationship with God that my life produces a yearning for God in the lives of others, not admiration for myself. Thoughts about myself hinder my usefulness to God. God’s purpose is not to perfect me to make me a trophy in His showcase; He is getting me to the place where He can use me. Let Him do what He wants.

My Utmost for His Highest (December 2nd)

¹ Oswald Chambers (1874-1917) was born in Aberdeen, Scotland. He studied art and archaeology at the University of Edinburgh before pursuing a Christian teaching ministry. He then studied theology at Dunoon College. From 1906-1910 he traveled to teach the Bible in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. In 1910, at the age of 36, Chambers married Gertrude Hobbs. In 1911 he founded and became principal of the Bible Training College in Clapham, London, where he lectured until the school was closed in 1915 because of World War I. In October 1915 he sailed for Egypt, where he served troops from Australia and New Zealand as a chaplain. He died there November 15, 1917, at the age of 43. Although Oswald Chambers wrote only one book, *Baffled to Fight Better*, more than thirty titles bear his name. With this one exception, published works were compiled by his wife, a court stenographer, from her verbatim shorthand notes of his messages taken during their seven years of marriage. For half a century following her husband's death she labored to share his insights. *My Utmost for His Highest*, his best-known book, has been continuously in print in the United States since 1935 and remains in the top ten titles of the religious book bestseller list with millions of copies in print. It has become a Christian classic.

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