

# Lift Up Before Pruning

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while very branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful..*

- John 15: 2 (apparent mistranslation)

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the garden. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he lifts up, and very branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*

- John 15: 2 (contextual translation)

This section has yet to be put into cohesive narrative form. But its content should be clear. In John 15, Jesus summarizes for His disciples what His pedagogy was that He lived out with Him. The key underpinning of Jesus' disciple making approach will be rooted in the following:

- James Montgomery Boice's contention that this verse has long been mistranslated. That it makes no sense in the care of the vineyard manager for the vine to throw out some of the vine as his first act in verse two, and then proceed to prune the rest. Rather, the sequence should be first lift up the vine, and then prune it. Since no one will embrace this important contextual understanding of John 15:2 on my say so, it will be helpful to quote Boice<sup>FN</sup> extensively at this point:

There are two things that the father is said to do in his care of the vine. First, he is said to "cut off" every branch that does not bear fruit. Generally this has been understood to be a purging away of dead branches in precisely the same sense that branches are "thrown into the fire" and "burned" in verse 6, but I am convinced that most translators have missed the true meaning of the term "cut off" in this instance. Undoubtedly, their translation has been made to conform to what they know or believe is coming in verse 6, but the translation is not the best or even the most general meaning of the Greek word *airo* which lies behind it. The word *airo* has four basic meanings, which are, proceeding from the most fundamental to the most figurative: (1) to lift up or pick up, (2) to lift up figuratively, as in lifting up one's eyes or voice, (3) to lift up with the added thought of lifting up in order to carry away, and (4) to remove. In translating this word by the verb "cut off," the majority of translators have obviously chosen the fourth of these meanings, for the reason suggested above. But the verse makes better sense and the sequence of verbs is better if the first and primary meaning of the word is taken. In that case the sentence would read, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he lifts up" that is, to keep it from trailing on the ground.

This translation makes better sense of the passage in every way, and in addition is much better theology. First, the emphasis of this opening section of the parable is, quite rightly, upon the care of the vine by the Father. It would be strange, granting this emphasis, if the first thing mentioned is the carrying away of unproductive branches. But it is not at all strange to emphasize that the gardener first lifts up the branches so that they may be better exposed to the sun and so the fruit will develop properly.

Secondly, this lifting up is precisely what is first done with vines, as anyone who has watched them being cared for knows... Thirdly, to translate the word *airo* by "lifts up" gives a proper sequence to the Father's care of the vineyard, indicated by the verb that follows. Thus, he first

Note that once a vine is fully pruned to ready for the next growing season, it looks like nothing is left! It is not just a little cutting away here and there, nor a little trimming here and there. Pruning is not trimming! It is radical cut-back surgery in the life of the vine.

Lifting up and pruning are all preparatory steps. Lifting up is repositioning for future fruitfulness (even though the why and what of it might not be self-evident for quite some time). David gets repositioned from shepherd to Saul's harpist, and then from harpist to renegade (where he discovered the secrets of Philistine metallurgy and sources of ore) to King on the throne. Moses gets repositioned from Egypt to the desert and back to Egypt forty years later. Jacob gets repositioned from "home" to Laban's home and back. Abram gets repositioned from Ur to Haran to Beersheba. Peter gets repositioned from the inner circle of Pharisaism to the desert, and then to the world of the Gentiles. God is always active repositioning His people as part of His way of preparing people for fruitful living in the Kingdom of God.

The implications of this are significant in disciple making ministries. In the same sense that educators talk about looking for those "teachable moments" in the lives of students, so the disciple maker is always praying for the eyes of discernment for "disciple making moments." Many of these moments come right after God repositions ("lifts up") His people. It may be sudden unemployment, or the birth of a special needs child, or the sudden realization that cancer is part of your life. All of these, while God is not necessarily the author of these life events, He nevertheless allows them to be, and uses them in a redemptive way to draw His children closer to Himself. It is at those moments of significant spiritual growth that the disciple maker can be used by God as part of that process in meaningful ways for added spiritual fruitfulness.

With regard to "lifting up," note that it is the complete core root of the vine in the photo that gets lifted up, not just part of the vine that is lifted up. When we get repositioned by the Lord, either directly or indirectly due to sudden unemployment, significant illness, etc., it is often used by God as yet another significant repositioning to impact not only our entire life, but our life with our spouse, our family and our friends, as well as with God. Also note that the closer the "rock" is placed near where the root comes out of the ground, the maximum downstream impact in terms of "lifting" and fruitfully repositioning it has on the whole downstream vine. Thus, God often elects to reposition us at the core of who we are, not just with regard to the tangential issues in our lives. That is one way a greater yield, harvest, is achieved over time. The closer to the source of where the root comes out of the ground, the greater the inflection/deflection impact is on the vine.

Develop why the sequencing of "lifting up" and then "pruning" is entirely harmonic with the sequencing of Grace before Truth developed in that chapter. The Grace is the "lifting up," the drawing of the disciple closer to God. With that in place, the Truth becomes the pruning that needs to be done. It is Grace before Truth.

Pruning = brokenness. Brokenness is not a punishment – rather it is profound preparation by Him who cares perfectly for His children.

Observation: Jesus didn't seem to spend much time rebuking the Twelve for their sin and continually call them to repentance. Why? Maybe if you can change a person paradigm, the issue of sin management and the need for continual repentance takes care of itself, or at least takes on a very different hue. In western discipleship, our approach often seems to be one of grafting Christian principles unto our already pre-existing secular rootstock. That is not the radical deconstructing and remaking of the root stock that Jesus intends. Psalm 51:7 deals with the need to completely remake our inward being. Thus, we are repositioned for purity of living (be a holy people) by God's creating a new heart within us (note this is David's request). There is also a connectedness between pruning and another season of being lifted up. Pruning can be used to bring us to the point of brokenness where we cry out and ask for God to create in us a new heart. It is at that point that authentic discipleship begins and we become open to having our paradigms remade. NOTE: possibly illustrate this with our being repositioned with the arrival of our special-needs son David. How that placed us into a whole new world of special needs people for the first time in our lives. How that has reshaped us and remade our

understanding of the value of persons and allowed us to start to resonate with the Luke 14: 21-24 command to go out and invite the poor, the lame, the crippled to the feast.

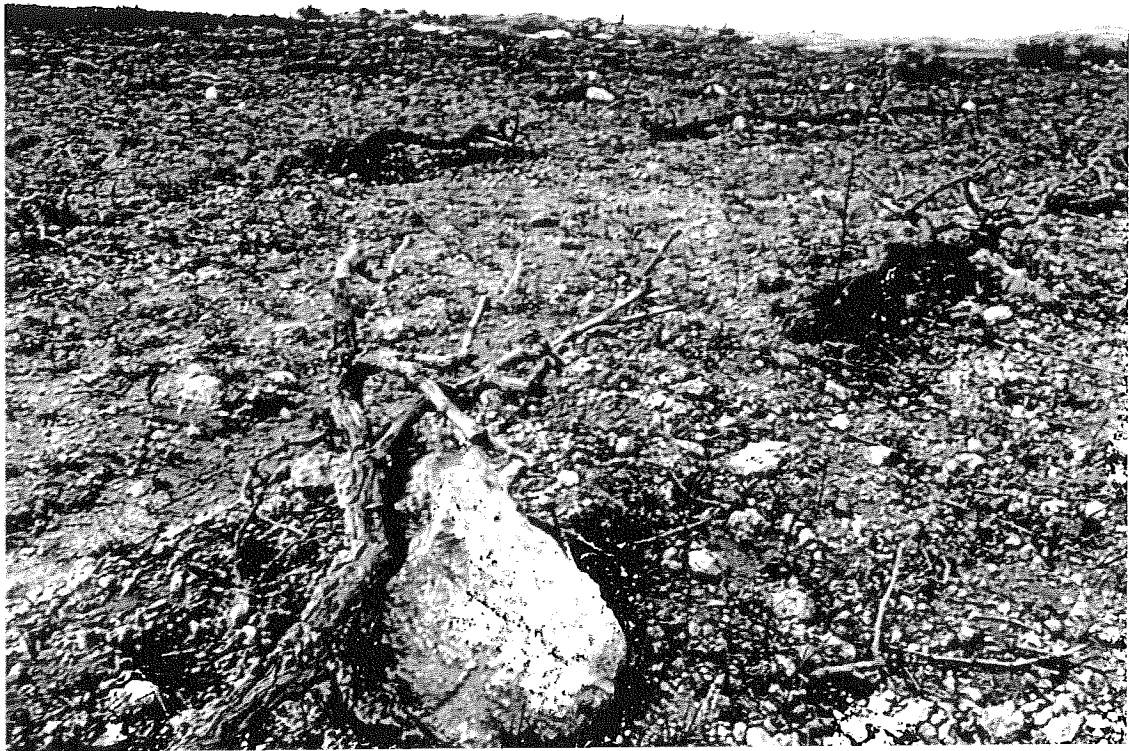
#### VINEYARD DISCUSSION WITH DR. MARK WHALOM, Entomologist, Michigan State University

- Vineyard management is already 1000 years old in the Middle East when Jesus uses this metaphor. Everyone in the Upper Room completely understands what He is talking about.
- It is the nature of vines that their roots needed to be stressed before they will become fruitfully productive. That's why they are most productive in poor soil with poor conditions. If the conditions are too favorable (good soil and moisture, the metaphor for the good/easy life) they will produce many branches and much foliage, but very little fruit (all of the energy is put into leaf production). Note how Jesus sent out the 72 in Luke 10 – without food and only one tunic, etc., to make the point that possessions and the concern of them is a significant impediment to bringing the “Good News” to others. That also has the corresponding result of forcing these disciples to be totally dependent on God (“abiding”) for their daily sustenance and provision (remember daily manna in the desert)

Often times we need to be stressed in the areas of our assumed competencies so that we “give up” resting in our own strength. Note the professional fisherman/sailor competencies of the disciples which gets stressed in at least two occasions of severe storms (Luke 8 and coming back from the feeding of the 5,000 in the Plain of Bethesda)

- Vines need a vinedresser desperately. Without that, they become a mass of intertwined branches producing a mat of leaves which ends up choking everything in its path, but which produces almost no fruit in that process.
- Pruning is a constant activity of the vineyard manager. It unfolds in three stages:
  - Once new growth is underway, and many new branches have begun to grow, the first stage is to select which branches stay connected to the vine and which ones are to be removed.
  - Second stage is to determine which runners get pruned from the branches that have been selected to stay.
  - Third stage starts when the grapes start to appear on the vine as the vineyard manager starts to remove the leaves near the green grape clusters so that the sun rays can reach them to continue the ripening process.
- Lifting up proceeds in stages as well. First stage is the lifting up of the main root with the rock (symbolic of Jesus as our rock). There is then a subsequent lifting up of the selected branches that remain as these secondary new growth runners do not have the internal strength to support much of their own weight of leaves and grapes as they eventually grow to a length of 8-12 feet from the main vine. As a result, these new growth runners need to be lifted up by a series of smaller stones, as well as by wooded branch Y props, which function as crutches to keep the leaves and blossoms of the runners off the ground over their extended length. This protects them from the potential adverse consequences of the morning dew should they every fall into contact with the ground. This is full of spiritual and disciple making implications that will be further developed.
- Grape vines are remarkably resistant to pest related issues? Need to clarify that with more discussions with Dr. Whalon.

Maybe use an “Observation” section for these secondary vineyard/vine related insights. Jesus draws upon three observations related to vineyard care and management, which suggests maybe we should indeed look further at what else we can learn from the metaphor He uses. If He sees multiple dimensions to this vine metaphor, maybe we need to explore it further for more of the same. It is of interest that in Bruce Wilkerson’s “Secrets of the Vine,” much of these insights are missing as he draws upon contemporary western vineyard management insights in his book, not the character and nature of Palestinian vineyard management during the time of Jesus. Some of the other possible implications are certainly intriguing:



of all lifts all vines up. Then he cuts off the unproductive elements, carefully cleansing the vine of insects, moss, or parasites that otherwise would hinder the growth of the plant... For these reasons the translation "lifts up" should be preferred. And if this is the case, then the first thing the Father is said to do is to lift the Christian closer to himself.

- A photograph I took in 1998 in a Palestinian vineyard showing how a rock gets placed near the main root coming out of the ground so as to "lift up" the vine to protect it from the mold and mildew that can occur from the morning dew if the vine is not "lifted up" off the ground.
- Observations from a Entomologist friend who has studied ancient Mesopotamian vineyards management as a hobby.
- An understanding of the Greek word for pruning which is much more a radical cutting back than our English understanding of trimming a little here and there off the edges.

With this understanding of John 15:2, Jesus first "lifts up" the disciples, or repositions them for better growth. By His call of "Follow Me," Jesus places them into a better climate or environment with this "lifting up," and then having done that, starts the radical pruning process. Consistent with this understanding, Jesus places the Twelve into a completely new environment by requiring them to follow Him around. In so doing, He then proceeds to place them into a series of new environments as part of radically pruning away all of their old observant Jewish worldview. Overtime they are prepared to be fruitful in the Kingdom of God when Pentecost comes.

The implications of all this are significant to current discipleship notions. Without realizing it, we too often view western discipleship as grafting on some Jesus principles to our already existing narcissistic western worldview. What we miss is the essential step of detoxing today's disciples from their western world view in the same manner that Jesus radically detoxed the Twelve from their religious worldview. This whole concept will be further developed

All of this then gets developed into some practical insights for making disciples today that we have missed because we have been unable to see the pastoral theology sequence that is in John 15:2 when properly translated.

#### **Additional Thought Development work will include...**

John 15 summarizes not only what He did, and what would continue to be done in their lives, but also what they needed to do in the lives of others working with THS. So Jesus uses an agrarian example that was already well understood for 1,000 years before he gave it. Something easy to remember!

Their notion of religious "righteousness" needed to be remade (pruned) into genuine repentance

The Disciples needed to be <sup>radical up</sup> repositioned for fruitfulness...

Out of rabbinic Pharisaism and into the Kingdom of God

Out of judgmentalism and into an environment of compassion and mercy

Out of hearts of stone. They needed their soil penetrated and tilled with a new plow that would turn their life over and allow seeds of compassion to be planted.

Out of the smugness of the inner circle of self-acclaimed "righteous" and into the real world where they could find out where the outcast weeps.

Out of behavioral righteousness and into heartfelt compassion

Out of their well-developed notions of what Messiah would be like, and into God's reality of what Messiah was going to be like and do.

This was going to seem like "Shock Therapy" to these disciples.

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