

A SHARP KNIFE FOR THE VINE BRANCHES

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BY C. H. SPURGEON,
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*“Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”
John 15:2.*

THESE are the words of Jesus. Unto YOU that believe He is precious, and every word that He speaks is precious for His sake. You will be sure, then, to give every syllable its weight and to let each word fall upon your soul as coming directly from His lips. These are the words of our Lord Jesus just before His departure from the world. We reckon the words of dying men to be worth keeping, and especially of such a matchless Man as our Lord and Master.

It may be said of Him, “You have kept the best wine until now,” for in this chapter and in that which follows we have some of the choicest, deepest, and richest words that the Master ever uttered. You will endeavor, then, to hear Him speaking as upon the verge of Gethsemane. You will listen to these sentences as coming to you associated with the groans and bloody sweat of His agony.

These are words, moreover, about *us*, and therefore to be received by us with profound attention. The most of us who are here, are in Christ, some one way or another. The majority of us profess to be Christians. The text, then, is directed to us. When Jesus speaks about anything, it is weighty and demands our ear. But when He speaks about ourselves to ourselves, we must give Him the *heart* as well as the ear, and give most earnest heed to the things which He speaks to us, lest by any means we let them slip. We may have to regret one day that we did not listen to His voice in love, for we may have to hear it when we must listen to it, when the tones have become those of *judgment*, and Jesus the *Judge* shall say unto us, “I know you not,” even though we shall venture to plead that we ate and drank in His Presence, and that He taught in our streets.

Having, then, your solemn attention, we will read the text again: “Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit.” The text suggests self-examination. It conveys instruction, and invites meditation.

I. In the first place, it SUGGESTS SELF-EXAMINATION. I hear in these solemn words the tones of His voice of whom Malachi said, “Who may abide the day of His coming? And who shall stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap.” I discern in these two heart-searching sentences, the voice of Him of whom John said, “His fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and gather His wheat into the garner. But He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Truly the Lord’s “fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.” Happy shall that man be who can bear to be thrust into the flames and to be covered with the hot coals of the burning Truths of God here taught! But he shall be found reprobate who cannot bear the trial.

1. Observe that our text mentions two characters who are in some respects exceedingly alike. They are both branches, they are both branches in the Vine: “Every branch in Me.” How much alike persons may apparently be, who, in God’s sight stand at opposite poles of character! Both the persons described in the text were in Christ: in Christ in different senses, it is obvious, because the first persons were not so in Christ as to bring forth fruit, consequently, as fruit is that by which we are to *judge* a man, they were not in Christ *effectually*, graciously, influentially, or so as to receive the fruit-creating sap.

If they had brought forth fruit, their fruitfulness would have been a sign that they were in Christ *savingly*. Who will venture to say that a man who yields no fruit of righteousness can be really a Christian? Yet they were *in Christ* in some sense or other, that is to say, the two characters were equally esteemed to be Christians. Their names were enrolled in the same Church register—in the common judgment of men they were equally Christian. According to their own profession

they were so. In many other respects which we need not now catalog, they were both in Christ as His avowed disciples—as soldiers professedly fighting under His banner—as servants wearing His livery.

These two persons were probably equally sound in their doctrinal views. They held the same precious Truths of God. If they heard falsehood, they were equally earnest to denounce it. When they listened to the Gospel they received it with joy, and so received it as to be willing to assist in the spread of it—and even to make sacrifices for its extension. These persons were equally attentive to ordinances. How often has it happened that two persons of widely different states before the Lord have been baptized at the same hour, in the same water, into the same name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! And they have then broken bread together with equal apparent fervency, and with equal professions of enjoyment and devotion!

These people have been equally fair in their profession. Their moral conduct has, in the judgment of all onlookers, been much the same. They have avoided everything of ill repute and they have, in their measure, sought after that which was comely and lovely in the estimation of men. Ah, there will often be found two who publicly pray alike, have an equal gift in prayer—and what is worse, *preach* with equal earnestness and zeal! And to all appearance their family prayer is maintained with the same consistency. But for all this the end of the one shall be to be cast away as a branch to be *burned*—while the end of the other shall be to bring forth fruit unto perfection—with everlasting life as the reward.

Ah, Friends, man can counterfeit cleverly, but when the devil helps him he becomes master of the art! You will see pieces of coinage which it is almost impossible for you to discover to be mere counterfeits by their appearance, or even by their ring. In the scales of weight they almost deceive you—but you put them into the fire—and then the discovery is made! Doubtless there are thousands in all Christian Churches who have the stamp and the impress of the King upon them. They look like the genuine shekels of the sanctuary who, after all, are only fit to be like bad money, fastened down on the footstool of the judgment seat with a nail driven through them—to their everlasting reprobation and disgrace!

How can we tell a bold man from a coward? Two soldiers wear the same uniforms—they talk equally loudly of what they will do when the enemy shall come. It is the *battle* that tests and proves them. Some peculiar phase of the conflict will bring out the difference. But till the battle comes how easy it is for the base coward to play the hero while, perhaps, the bravest man may modestly shrink into the rear! Our text, then, brings before us two characters apparently alike.

2. Then, in the second place it shows us the distinction between them—the great and solemn difference. The first branch brought forth no fruit. The second branch bore some fruit. “By their fruits you shall know them.” We have no right to judge of our neighbors’ motives and thoughts except so far as they may be clearly discoverable by their actions and words. The *interior* we must leave with God, but the exterior we *may* judge, and *must* judge. There is a sense in which we are not to judge men, but there is another sense in which he would be an arrant fool who did not constantly exercise his judgment upon men. “By their fruits you shall know them,” is our Lord’s own canon of sacred criticism. If you would judge men and judge yourselves, this is the one test—“by their fruits.”

Now, then, what do you professors say who are present here today—you who are so regular in your attendance upon the means of Divine Grace? Will you now search yourselves to see whether you have any fruit? That you may be helped in such an investigation let me remind you that the Apostle Paul has given us a list of these fruits in his fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians. He says in the 22nd verse, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”

Nine kinds of fruit—all of these should be “in us and abound.” Let us question ourselves whether we have any of them. Say, Professor, have you brought forth the fruit of love? Searching question, this! I do not ask if you can *talk* of love, but, do you *feel* it? I do not say, is love upon your *tongue*? But, does love rule your *heart*? Do you love God as a child loves its father? Do you love the Savior from a sense of gratitude to Him who bought you with His blood? Do you feel the love of the gracious Comforter who dwells in you, if you are, indeed, a child of God? What do you know about love to the Brethren?

Do you love the Saints, as Brothers and Sisters in Christ whether they belong to *your* Church or not? Whether they please you or serve your turn or not? Say, do you love God’s poor? Do you love God’s persecuted and despised ones? Answer, I pray you. What about love to the kingdom of the Lord’s dear Son, and to the souls of men? Can you sit still and be satisfied with being saved, yourself, while your neighbors are being damned by the thousands? Are your eyes never wet with tears for impenitent souls? Do the terrors of the Lord never get hold upon you, when you think of men plunging

themselves into perdition? “He that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” Have you this fruit, then? If not, “every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away.”

Next comes *joy*. Does your religion ever give you joy? Is it mere matter of duty, a heavy chain for you to drag about like a convict, or is your religion a harp for you to dance to the tune of? Do you ever rejoice in Jesus Christ? Do you know what the “joy of the Lord” means? Does it ever give you joy to think that He is the same even when the fig tree does not blossom and the herd is cut off from the stall? Do you feel a joy in reading the promises of God’s Word? Have you a joy in secret prayer—that joy which the world never gave you—and cannot take away from you? Have you a secret joy, like a spring shut up, a fountain sealed which is only open to you and your Lord, because your fellowship is with Him and not with the sons of sin?

He that never mourned because of sin has never repented, but he who has never rejoiced because of forgiveness cannot have seen the Cross! Come, then, have you produced this fruit of joy? The Lord give it more and more to you! If you have never had it, then hear the sentence—“Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away.”

Next follows *peace*. Oh, blessed fruit! An autumn fruit, mellow and sweet, and fit for an angel’s tooth. It is the fruit the blessed feed upon in Heaven—peace with God, peace of conscience, peace with one’s fellow men—“the peace of God which passes all understanding.” The peace which “keeps the heart and mind through Jesus Christ.” “Great peace have they which love Your Law: and nothing shall offend them.” “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ah, my Hearers, some of you make a great deal of noise, perhaps, about religion, and yet never have peace of conscience! This is what ceremonialists never can obtain. “We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle” of outward ordinances, and carnal, vainglorious, pompous ceremonies. Of our altar, where the finished sacrifice is eaten as a peace offering, they cannot eat. They find no peace after all their “masses,” and holy offices, and processions, and sacred hours, and priestcraft, and I know not what! Poor slaves, they go down to their graves as much in bondage as ever—with the dreary prospect of a purgatorial fire before them—no delightful prospect of waking up in the likeness of Christ! They have no sense of the truth of that glorious passage, “and you are complete in Him.” He that has Christ has this one of His fruits, namely, *peace*. He who knows no peace with God has good need to tremble.

Mention is next made of *long-suffering*. I fear there are many professors who have very little of this, a quality which may be viewed in many aspects. There is patience, which bears God’s chastising hand and does not turn against Him, but says, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Long-suffering towards God—suffering long. Then there is long-suffering towards man—bearing persecution without apostasy. Bearing slander and reproach without revenge—bearing the errors and mistakes of mankind with tender compassion. The Believer should have much of this.

Some of us, perhaps, may be naturally quick-tempered. Divine Grace must overcome angry passions. It is not for you to say, “I cannot help it.” The fruit of the Spirit is long-suffering—you *must* help it! If there is no change in your temper, there is no change in you at all—you still have need to be converted. If the Grace of God does not help you, in a measure, to keep under that temper which will be there, but which you must restrain, you have need to go to God and ask Him to make sound work in you, or there is no work of Grace there as of yet. We must have long-suffering—or we may be found fruitless—and then woe unto us.

Next in order is *gentleness*, by which I understand *kindness*. The Christian is a man of kindness. He recognizes his kindness with his fellow men. He wishes to treat them as his kin. He has compassion for those who are suffering. He endeavors to make his manners kind and courteous. He knows that there is a natural offense in the Cross to carnal men. He does not wish, therefore, to make any offense of his own. He desires in his own life not to be morose, suspicious, harsh, proud or domineering, but he seeks to imitate his Master, who said of Himself, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.”

The Believer in Christ should be gentle towards all men with whom he comes in contact. This is one of the fruits of the Spirit, and, I may add, a fruit of the Spirit in which many professors are terribly deficient. Do not think that I judge you. I judge you not—there *is* One that judges you, it is this Word of God which we speak. Gentleness is the fruit of the Spirit and if you have it not, you have not this fruit of the Spirit—and what says the text, “Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away!”

We are next reminded of *goodness*, by which is undoubtedly meant beneficence, benevolence, generosity—not merely kindness of manner—but bounty of heart. Oh what a fine thing it is when our Christianity gives us a noble spirit! We cannot all be nobles in pocket, but every child of God should be a noble in his *heart*. “Come in,” said a poor Scotch woman to some of the Lord’s people, “I have room for ten of you in my house, but I have room for 10,000 of you in my heart.”

So should the Believer say, “Come in, you that are in need. I have not the power to help many of you, but I have the will to help all of you if I could.” The Christian should be like his Lord and Master—easily entreated, ready to communicate, making it his delight and his business to distribute, like a cloud that is full of rain and empties itself upon the earth. A Christian should be like the bright and sparkling sun scattering his beams abroad and not hiding or hoarding his light. If you have not this fruit of the Spirit in some measure I beseech you to remember the solemn words of the text, “Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away.”

Then comes *faith*, by which is probably not meant the *Grace* of faith which is rather a root than a fruit, yet that is included. The fruit of the Spirit is, indeed, faith in God. Without this there is not even the commencement of anything like security in the soul. Do you believe on the Son of God? Have you faith? If you have faith but as a grain of mustard seed, it is a sign of life within you. If you have little of it, pray, “Lord, increase our faith!”

But the faith here, I think, means *faithfulness*—faithfulness towards God, faithfulness towards conscience. How little some Christians make of that nowadays! Why they swallow their consciences! There are ministers who subscribe to words which they know to be deceiving the people and help to buttress a Church which is doing its utmost to lead this nation into downright Popery. The good and gracious ministers in the Establishment are the prop and pillar of it and by their influence they maintain a system which enables traitors to pollute this land with Popery.

O that our friends had a little more tenderness of conscience and would come out from their unhallowed alliance with the Popish Ritualists. How earnestly do I pray that none of us have the remotest connection with anything which would take us back to that Antichrist which God hates—which He so hates that He has bid His servant John call the apostate church by a dreadful name—a brand of infamy, a name which God never uses till He has cast off and utterly abhorred a thing.

My Brothers and Sisters, may your consciences be faithful and may you be faithful to your consciences! Men that trifle with doctrine, it seems to me, little know what sins they commit. I tell you who trifle with doctrines that you are as bad as thieves! You are worse, for the thief only robs men, but you rob *God* and your own souls! By helping to foster error, you are heaping together the elements of a pestilence which, unless Divine Grace prevents, will utterly destroy this land.

We must have faithfulness, also, in our dealings with our fellow men in business. Saints are men of honor. The Christian man “swears to his own hurt, and changes not.” He does not take an oath, but his word is his bond. O that we may have this fruit of the Spirit—faithfulness, directness, straight-forwardness, doing the right, loving the true, and walking uprightly before the Lord our God!

The next fruit is *meekness*. May we possess much of this for there is a peculiar benediction promised to the meek—“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” The Christian is to be as harmless as a dove. In his Master’s battles, bold as a lion, but for *himself* and for his own causes, tender, gentle, shunning debate, loving quietness, ready to take a rebuke rather than to administer one—feeling himself to be weak and frail. Moses was the meekest of men, often provoked, but only once speaking unadvisedly with his lips. It is marvelous how he bore with the people! They were the most provoking people in the world, except ourselves—but yet, like as a nurse is tender with a sick child—even so was he with a foolish people.

How often did they provoke him and grieve his spirit! He grew angry in ignorance and dashed the two tablets of stone upon the ground when he saw the idolatry of the people. Moses, the meekest of men, could not bear that! And God’s meekest servants grow wrathful when they think of the idolatry into which this land is sliding so rapidly. But meek we must be towards all men—and if we have not this fruit, the Master says, “Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away.”

Do not forget *temperance*, which is now generally used in respect to meats and drinks, but which has a far wider significance, though it includes that. The man who indulges the appetites of the flesh and cannot control himself as to eating

and drinking need not even *pretend* to be a Christian. He has first to prove that he is equal to a *beast* before he may pretend to be a child of God! He has first to show that he is a *man* before he may claim to be a Christian. Those who indulge in drunkenness shall drink of the wine of God's wrath before long, and then how bitter will their sweet wines be to them! How will that which has been sweet to the throat be as poison in the heart forever and ever! If we have not that kind of temperance, evidently we can know nothing about true religion.

But there must be an equal temperance in all other things, a temperance in your dress, in your expenditure, in your temper and, indeed, in every act. There is a moderation to be observed, a narrow road to be followed which the tutored eye of the spiritual man can see and which it is a fruit of the Spirit for the spiritual foot to tread. God grant that we may have these fruits. Beloved in the Lord, I am persuaded that no Truth of God needs to be pressed more upon my own soul and yours than this—that positive fruit is the *only* test of our being in Christ. It is so easy for us to wrap ourselves up in the idea that attention to religious ceremonies is the test, but it is not so, for, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees,” who were the most religious people of their day, “you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of Heaven.”

I know it is easy to think, “Well, I do not indulge in drunkenness. I am no rogue. I do not do this or that.” This matters little! Remember that the judgment will not be about those things which you do *not* do, but about positive things. How does Jesus Christ put that judgment matter? “I was hungry and you gave me no meat. I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink. I was a stranger and you took Me not in. Naked, and you clothed Me not. Sick, and in prison, and you visited Me not.” The absence of positive fruit was that which condemned the lost. “Every tree,” says John, “that bears no fruit shall be hewn down and cast into the fire.” He does not say, “Every tree that bears *bitter* fruit, or sour grapes,” but “Every tree that brings forth *no fruit*.”

Fruitless professors, tremble! I may not speak so as to make this Truth of God penetrate as I wish it should into your inmost souls, but I pray the eternal Spirit to make it like fire in the bones of every deceived man and woman! If my Lord shall come to you, my Hearer, day after day, as He once came to the fig tree, and should find leaves upon you and no fruit, I tell you He will say, “Henceforth let no fruit be on you forever,” and you shall wither away. What is His own parable The master of the vineyard said to the husbandman, “Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none: cut it down; why cumberst it the ground?”

And when the husbandman interceded, you will remember his intercession was only so far: “If it bears fruit, well: and if not, then after that you shall cut it down.” Jesus the Intercessor agrees with His Father the Husbandman. Mercy agrees with Justice—if there is no fruit—the tree must come down. May I beseech you to lay these things to heart. You must bear fruit unto God by the power of the Spirit or it is down with you! God fingers His axe this morning. It is sharp and if He does but lift it, woe to you, barren fig tree! Woe, indeed, to me also, if I am found barren in the day of the Lord's appearing!

In closing this weighty business of self-examination, I must remind you that our Lord tells us that although these persons were in some points alike, the solemn difference between them led to a solemn result—“Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away.” There are many ways in which the Lord takes away barren branches. Sometimes He allows the professor to apostatize. He gets rich and then he will not go to the place of worship which he used to frequent when he was a poorer man and was humble enough to hear the Gospel—he must go to some fashionable place where he can listen to anything but the Truth of God—and thus by his own pride he is taken away.

Or else he is allowed to fall into open sin. We always should regret the falls of professors, but sometimes it is possible that discovered sins may be a blessing, for they take away from the Church men who never ought to have been there and who were an injury to it. Many bright professors have stood well for a long time, but at last they have been snuffed out ecclesiastically by reason of their outward sins. God has taken them away. Some have been taken away in a more terrible sense, by death. God has removed them. They have lived in the Church and died in the Church, but have been taken away in solemn judgment and cast into the fire.

Then there is a taking away which is worst of all, when the Master shall say, “Depart, you cursed!” Now, remember, these were respectable people. These were people like you—decent, good people, who attended a place of worship, and contributed, and were very moral—but still they had not Divine Grace in their souls. They had nominal Christianity, but not the fruit of the Spirit, and what was done with them? “Lord, cannot some mild means be used? How sad to see

these branches cut off!" "No," He says, "if they bring not forth fruit, they must be taken away." "But, Lord, they never reeled in and out of the gin palace! Lord, they were much too good and much too amiable to be found among the debased and the debauched!"

"Take them away! They brought no fruit, and they must be taken away." "But, Master, they were so diligent in the use of ordinances. They were so constant and regular in the form of prayer!" "They brought forth no fruit," says He, "take them away." There is only this one thing for them—if they had, through saving faith, been made to bear the fruit of the Spirit, they would have been saved—but as there was no fruit, take them away. What is done with that which is taken away? If I could take you just outside the garden wall I would let you see a heap of weeds and slips that are taken from the vine. There they are heaped together with a little straw, and the gardener burns them. The other branches with their purple clusters are in honor, but these dishonored things are burnt outside the gate.

I cannot describe to you that day of doom, that terrible fate which shall come upon fruitless branches of the spiritual vine. They will be outside the gate with a great gulf fixed between them and Heaven, where the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever—"where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched." If such people are cast away, what will become of some of you? If these good people who were in Christ, in a way, still perish because they brought forth no fruit, O you who are like hemlock in the furrows of the field, you who produce the grapes of Gomorrah and the apples of Sodom—what shall be your doom in the day of account when the Master shall come forth in robes of judgment to execute righteousness among the sons of men?

II. Briefly on the second point. **THE TEXT CONVEYS INSTRUCTION.** Looking at it carefully we observe that the fruit-bearing branches are not perfect. If they were perfect they would not need pruning. But the fact is there is much of original inbred sin remaining in the best of God's people. So whenever the sap within them is strong for the production of fruit there is a tendency for that strength to turn into evil, and instead of good fruit evil is produced. It is the strength of the tree and the richness of the sap which makes the branch produce too much wood so that it needs pruning. The gardener desires to see that strength in clusters, but alas, instead it runs into wood.

Now observe that in a Christian when the sap comes into him to produce confidence in God, because of the evil that is in him it often produces confidence in *himself*, and he who would be strong in faith becomes strong in carnal security. When the sap would produce zeal, how very frequently it turns into rashness, and instead of zeal with knowledge, fanaticism is brought forth! Suppose the sap flows to produce self-examination? Very generally unbelief is the outgrowth and instead of the man doubting himself, he begins to doubt his Lord. How often have I seen even the joy of the Lord turned into pride, and when the man should rejoice in Christ Jesus he has begun to rejoice in himself, to grow proud and say, "What a fine experience I possess!"

That love which we ought to bear towards our neighbors—how apt is that to run into love of the world and carnal complacency towards its evil ways! The gentleness which I praised just now often turns to a silly compliance with everybody's whim. And meekness, which is a fruit of the Spirit, how often *that* becomes an excuse for holding your tongue when you ought boldly to speak! The fact is, it is very difficult to keep ourselves, when we are in a flourishing state, from producing wood instead of grapes. God grant us Divine Grace to keep us from this evil! And I do not know how the Grace can come except by His judicious pruning.

I say the fruit-bearing branches are not perfect because they bear a great deal that is not fruit, and, moreover, not one of them bears as much fruit as it ought to do. I do not agree with Mr. Wesley's opinion about perfection. It is very difficult to see how he could have done more than he did, but I do not doubt that even *he* felt that he might have been more like his Lord. None of the Lord's people with whom I ever came into communion have dared to think themselves perfect—and if they had said so, and proved it—I should have rejoiced to think that there were such people, but greatly sorrowed to find that I belong to a very different order of beings myself. "In me, that is, in my flesh, there dwells no good thing."

The Master is bringing us upon our way to bring forth more fruit, but as yet, the fruit-bearing branches are not perfect. Therefore we are taught, in the second place, that pruning is the lot of all the fruitful Saints. You may escape it if you are not fruitful—you will be cut off—you will not be pruned. But all the fruit-bearing Saints must feel the knife. Observe Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—had not those Patriarchs their trials? Moses and David, Jeremiah and Daniel—who among those escaped? Though they honored their Master much, who escaped without the pruning knife? And if you

come to the Believers of the New Testament, surely the flame was seven times hotter with regard to them than with regard to the elder Brethren.

How does the Lord prune His people, then? It is generally said by *affliction*. I question if that could be proved as it stands—it needs explanation. It is generally thought that our trials and troubles purge us. I am not sure of that, they certainly are lost upon some. Our Lord tells us what it is that prunes us. “Now,” says He, in the third verse of the chapter, “you are clean (or pruned) through the Word which I have spoken unto you.” It is the *Word* that prunes the Christian, it is the *Truth* that purges him—the *Scripture*, made living and powerful by the Holy Spirit—which effectually cleanses the Christian.

“What, then, does *affliction* do?” you ask. Well, if I may say so, affliction is the handle of the knife—affliction is the grindstone that sharpens up the Word of God. Affliction is the dresser which removes our soft garments and lays bare the diseased flesh so that the surgeon’s lancet may get at it. Affliction makes us ready to feel the Word, but the true pruner is the Word in the hand of the Great Husbandman. Sometimes when you lay stretched upon a bed of sickness you think more upon the Word than you did before. That is one great thing. In the next place, you see more the applicability of that Word to yourself. In the third place, the Holy Spirit makes you feel more, while you are thus laid aside, the force of the Word than you did before.

Ask that affliction may be *sanctified*, Beloved, but always remember there is no more tendency in affliction in itself to sanctify us than there is in prosperity! In fact, the natural tendency of affliction is to make us rebel against God which is quite opposite to sanctification. It is the Word coming to us while *in* affliction that purges us. It is God the Holy Spirit laying home Divine Truths and applying the blood of Jesus, and working in all His Divine energy in the soul. It is this that prunes us, and affliction is only the handle of the knife, or what if I say the ladder which the gardener takes to reach the vine so that he may prune it better?

Now it may be that some of us have been afflicted a great deal and have *not* been pruned. I know some people who have been very poor—I do not see that they are any better for it. And I know some others who have been very sick, but I have never heard that they have been improved. Alas, some people are of such a character that if they were stricken till their whole head were sick—and their whole heart faint—they would not be benefited! If they were beaten till they were all bruises and putrefying sores they would still go on to rebel—for these things only provoke them to a greater hatred against the Most High. We must be pruned, but it must be by the Word, through affliction.

Now the object in this pruning is never condemnatory. God does not purge His children with a view to visit them penally for sin. He chastises, but He cannot *punish* those for whom Jesus Christ has been already punished! You have no right to say, when a man is afflicted, that it is because he has done wrong. On the contrary, “every branch that bears fruit He purges.” Just the branch that is good for something gets the pruning knife! Do not say of yourselves, or of other people, “That man must have been a great offender or he would not have met with such a judgment.” Nonsense! Who was a holier man than Job? But has any been brought lower than he?

Why, the fact is, it is because the Lord loves His people that He chastens them—not because of any anger that He has towards them! Learn, Beloved, especially you under trial, not to see an angry God in your pains or your losses, or your crosses—instead, see a Husbandman who thinks you a branch whom He estimates at so great a rate that He will take the trouble to prune you—which He would not do if He had not a kind consideration towards you. The real reason is that more fruit may be produced, which I understand to mean more in *quantity*.

A good man who feels the power of the Word pruning him of this and that superfluity, sets to work, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to do more for Jesus. Before he was afflicted he did not know how to be patient. He learns it at last—a hard lesson. Before he was poor he did not know how to be humble, but he learns that. Before the Word came with power he did not know how to pray with his fellows, or to speak to sinners, or lay himself out for usefulness. But now the more he is pruned, the more he serves his Lord.

More fruit in variety, too, may be intended. One tree can only produce one kind of fruit, usually, but the Lord’s people can produce many, as we have already seen. And the more they are pruned the more they will produce. There will be all kinds of fruit, both new and old, which they will lay up for their Beloved. There will be more in quality, too. The man may not pray *more*, but he will pray more *earnestly*. He may not preach more sermons, but he will preach them more thoroughly from his heart with a greater unction. It may be that he will not be more in communion with God as to *time*,

but it will be a *closer* communion. He will throw himself more thoroughly into the Divine element of communion and will become more hearty in all that he does.

This is the result of the pruning which our heavenly Father gives. And if such is the result, the Lord keep on pruning, for what greater blessing can a man have than to produce much fruit for God? Better to serve God much than to become a prince. He that does much for Christ shall shine as the stars forever and ever! He is good in God. He is blessing his fellow men. He is bringing joy into his own spirit. Oh, if on bended knee we might seek but one favor, I think we should not ask the wisdom which Solomon craved—we would petition for this—that we might bring forth much fruit, so that we might be Christ's disciples.

III. To conclude. Our text INVITES MEDITATION. I will hint at the points on which it invites our thoughts. It suggests to every unconverted person here this one thought—it seems that it is not very easy for the righteous to be saved—"If the righteous scarcely are saved, where shall the ungodly and the wicked appear?" If the branches in Christ that bear no fruit are taken away, what must become of the Sabbath-breakers, the despisers of God, the atheists, the drunkards, the unchaste, the dishonest, the blasphemers? I raise the question—solve it! Let it burn into your soul!

Secondly, what a mercy it is to the Believer that it is *pruning* with him and not cutting off! Ah, let the knife be very sharp. Let the Word of God throw us into the great deeps till we almost despair. Yet, thank God we are not cast into Hell! Dear Friends, your prayer should be, "Lord, let Your Word cut deep into me. Do not let the preacher mince matters with me. Deliver him from sewing pillows under my armholes and lulling me to sleep. Lord, I would be faithfully dealt with! I put the proud flesh before You—cut it out that the wound heals not so as to be worse when healed than it was when a running sore."

What a mercy it is not to be cut off! Ah, Christian, you are desponding and doubting today while the Word is searching you—but you might have been in Hell! Think of that! You are poor, or you are full of pain, but you might have been driven from the Presence of God! How can you, as a living man, complain about whatever God may place upon you? In the next place it would be well to think how gently the pruning has been done with the most of us, up till now, compared with our barrenness. I wonder the Lord has not cut us much more. He who has a deep-seated disease requires sharp medicine. And when the sore runs deep, the doctor must cut deep, too. With all the rust that is on us, it is a wonder we are not filed more. There is so much alloy, it is marvelous that we are not more often put into the fire. O Spirit of God, You have hard work with some of us! Still we bless You, for Your gentleness has been manifested very graciously. How tenderly have You dealt with our frail dust, O God of love!

Again, how earnestly we ought to seek for more fruit! If this is what God seeks after, *we* should be after it! If He often goes the length of pruning the vine—although He does not love to do it, for He does not afflict willingly, or grieve the children of men for nothing—let us agree with God and seek to yield more fruit. How concerned should every one of us be to be efficaciously and truly one with Christ! I ought to have said that the whole gist of the text lies in that "in Me, in Me, in Me." You see, if a man is not in Christ at all, why then, of course, there is no hope of any sort! And then, when he *is* in Christ, there come the questions—is he in Christ by living faith, by real trust? Has he the faith of God's elect? Has he been born again from above? Is he a spiritual Grace-taught soul? Let these be the questions which shall rest upon our minds.

I would that this morning my text might be sweet to you. Sweet, I said, because if for the moment it seems bitter, the *end* is sweetness. Faithful are the wounds of such a friend as Jesus! If He has wounded any of you, it is not to drive you from Him but to make you cling closer to Him! Have you never learned that, when you feel the most humbled, most afraid, most full of sin, most conscious of your own imperfection, the best thing is to cling to Christ more?

"Well, Lord, if I have been the most cursed hypocrite that ever lived, I will come to You. If up to this moment I have been deceived and have not had a grain of true faith, nor a single one of the fruits of the Spirit, yet here I am, a poor vile sinner! I fly to the fountain—a naked sinner. I wrap Your righteousness about my loins! I am a poor sin-sick, lost sinner—I look up to You on yonder Cross and I do believe that You can save me! From the very jaws of death, and out of the belly of Hell do I cry unto You, and You will hear me."

O Sinners and Saints, come to Christ again whether you are His experimentally, or are strangers to Him, come to Him now, for still the Gospel bell rings out sweetly, "Whoever will, let him take the water of life freely." O God, grant us Grace to come now afresh, and Yours be the praise! Amen, and Amen.